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Life Groups

LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS



THE 6 LIFE GROUP LEADER ESSENTIALS

Life group leaders are charged with an incredible responsibility. Because you are involved in the day-to-day lives of your group members, you have tremendous influence on the spiritual lives of the people in your groups. With this in mind, we encourage you to prioritise your own relationship with God. We will be focusing on six key aspects of group leadership - six essentials that are critical to the success of your groups.

Think Life Change – Why we do Life Groups

Bill Hybels has said that vision leaks. And that is definitely true when it comes to the vision and purpose for groups. It is easy for groups to drift away from their main purpose. So this value reminds us why we have groups: to create predictable environments where participants experience spiritual growth and authentic community; an environment where God is active in the lives of its members; a small group where people *change*. Keeping the life-change goal front and centre challenges us to keep our groups purposeful.

Cultivate Relationships – How we build Community

This essential focuses on how we build a sense of community in our groups. Relationships are like bank accounts: They don't just happen. They require regular intentional deposits. Starting early to build the relational capital of the group is one of the most important steps we can take. Planning a social get together once a term is a terrific way to build those relationships. We must make ongoing deposits to continually cultivate relationship among the group members. Planned deposits bring greater relational satisfaction to a group's balance sheet.

Promote Participation – How you lead a group

This essential focuses on how we lead the group meeting. It reminds us that since shared participation creates broader ownership of the group, all group members should be encouraged to participate often in the facilitation and leadership of the group meeting. This essential also reminds us to promote participation by being navigators of discussion, not teachers of curriculum. The difference is critical. Every time we ask open-ended questions, we are inviting participation. More than sharing the right answers, we want people to share their lives.

Replace Yourself – How to Intentionally Apprentice

This essential encourages us to intentionally apprentice someone in our group for future leadership. The apprentice is someone who has the potential to replace a leader, not simply assist him. Since adults often learn on a need-to-know basis, apprenticing is the most effective way to identify and train group leaders. When we put someone into the game, he or she learns quickly. Ideally, we should identify an apprentice within the first six months of the group.

Provide Care –How you handle Tough Situations

This essential reminds us that the primary way BPCC provides care to its attendees is through Life groups. We are equipped on how to deal with challenging situations in our groups. We are provided access to additional care ministry resources available from the church, we partner with the Care ministry at BPCC.

Multiply Influence – How you Maximise Influence

This final essential reminds us that multiplying our groups opens the door for others to participate in group life. It also allows us the opportunity to multiply our influence. While we recognize this to be the most difficult aspect of group leadership, it can also be the most rewarding.



Becoming a Leader People Will Follow

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

Small groups need good leaders. People, however, are not quick to follow. They are watching closely to see if we will lead them with godliness and integrity. How do you become such a leader?

Make an honest appraisal of your character. Who are you supposed to be in Christ? Confess if necessary, and commit to a holy life. Remember, character is who you are when no one is looking.

Discipline yourself to live as a whole person. Give attention to the spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects of your life. What activities or attitudes are causing you to neglect one or more of these areas? You may have to deny the lesser to gain the greater.

Practice vulnerability. Speak honestly about your failures, struggles, and questions. Be quick to admit your need of forgiveness.

Understand the vision of small-group ministry. If you have no purpose for meeting, people will find better things to do.

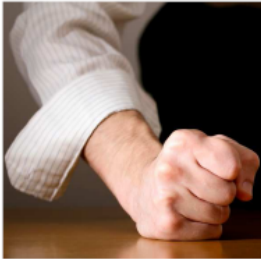
Be equipped. Be a student of life, always looking for the lessons taught by the Master Teacher. Be prepared and "prayed up" for each meeting. Excellence comes only as the reward for labor.

Learn to handle criticism. Ask yourself: Is the criticism the truth? Have I created a critical atmosphere by being critical myself? Allow criticism to make you stronger, not defeat you. And remember, the only way to avoid criticism is to say nothing, do nothing, and be nothing.

Earnestly pray. Ask God for wisdom, compassion, and His perfect will. Prayer may not alter our circumstances, but it changes us.

Lead with passion and compassion. Lead with intense love for each person in your group, the ministry, the Scriptures, and especially God. Such love changes everything it touches.

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Disarming Difficulties in Small Groups

Being prepared to handle the problems by having a strategy is an important part of leading your group.

By Neal F. McBride

Wouldn't it be wonderful if life were trouble free? But we all know it isn't! You will face difficulties in leading your small group. Being prepared to handle the problems by having a strategy is an important part of leading your group.

Typical Problems

Good planning and preparation will fend off many problems before they arise. But even the best planning cannot account for every difficult situation. Therefore, knowing what conflicts commonly arise in groups is useful in preparing an adequate response. In my experience, most of the conflicts or difficulties groups face fit into one of five general areas.

Expectations. Group members come together expecting certain things to happen. Most members bring ideas about what the purpose of the group is, what the group does, how they'll profit from being a member, and the demands the group will place on them.

Participation patterns. As unique individuals, group members will demonstrate various verbal and nonverbal behavior patterns. Quiet members may say little because they are intimidated by a highly verbal member. One person may dominate group discussions. Another jokes about everything. Then there is the academic member who questions everyone's statements from a philosophical perspective. These examples could go on and on.

Meeting formats. "I think we should have a Bible study." "No, we should spend our time praying for one another." "Let's not meet this week but go to the football game instead." "I don't care what they said we should do, I think we need to..." Comments such as these reflect disagreement over the group's agenda.

Leadership skills. Some problems arise because we lack leadership skills or stumble in applying those we do have. We may come on too strong at the wrong time or not strongly enough. Conflict between members may cause serious problems because the leader allows the problem to fester rather than dealing with it. A wide range of conflicts can arise when the leader fails to lead.

Administrative details. "I thought you were going to do that!" "What time is the meeting?" "Whose house is the meeting at tonight?" These questions all reflect administrative problems.

A Strategic Approach

Realistically speaking, you'll likely encounter some problems. Therefore, you need to have a plan to resolve them. Here's a four-step strategy you may find helpful.

Step One: Recognition. Words such as "I sense you are upset, Tom" or "We need to deal with this difference of opinion" signal that the person speaking has recognized a problem and is assisting the group members to acknowledge the difficulty. Problems cannot be dealt with until they are recognized. Sweeping conflict under the carpet doesn't work.

Step Two: Personalization. The second step aims to put people at ease, not to place blame on someone. Conflict frequently raises people's temperatures. It is easy to lose control and attack personalities rather than the problem or disagreement. Help everyone understand that problem solving is natural and needed. The goal is to help the group profit from the experience.

Step Three: Clarification. Clarify the exact nature of the problem, and pursue the potential solutions. Defining the problem can be quick or quite complicated. At times the problem isn't what you see, hear, or think it is. The real difficulty is beyond your ability to identify and address without special assistance. But assuming that in most cases your assessment of the problem is correct, what are the acceptable alternatives?

Step Four: Resolution. The final step is to select the best alternative and put it into action. Problem solving is easier said than done. Why? Because dealing with problems is dealing with people, and people don't always fit into nice four-step strategies. Nevertheless, with ample care and sensitivity this sequence of steps can serve you well.

In those extreme cases when a member is unwilling to cooperate with the group's attempts at problem solving, you'll need to deal with that person outside of the group. In a really rare case, you may find it necessary to ask the person to withdraw from the group.

Don't be shy in seeking outside help if you cannot solve the problem within the group. I suggest you contact your pastor or small-group ministry leader. Sometimes bringing in someone from outside the group provides a remedy that was elusive up to that point. Whatever method or approach you use to deal with difficulties, be sure to involve the members of your group. And remember, lack of *clarity* and lack of *charity* do the most to hinder the success of a small group.

Problem People

Earlier we discussed five typical problem areas and mentioned that most were actually people problems. One of the people problems you must deal with is people's expectations for the group. Meet some folks I have run into and you're likely to encounter, if you haven't done so already. Their expectations are legitimate but taken to extremes.

- Social Sidney.** Sid is the life of the party. He wants to lighten up the sessions and have some fun. Sid views the group as an opportunity to be with people. It's a context to meet his need for social involvement—even though he may not consciously recognize that.
- Academic Ann.** Ann is an intellectual giant who takes great pleasure in digging into Scripture. Her expectations for the small group are not met unless Bible study is the primary activity. Every word in the biblical passage must be carefully analyzed. Interpreting the passage is her goal. But neither application nor the other members of the group interest her much.
- Listener Larry.** Not much of a talker, Larry just wants to listen to what the others have to say. Mentally, he is actively involved. On the rare occasion he does speak, Larry's comments usually are thoughtful and well stated. He wants other group members to accept his quiet participation and leave him alone. Larry is always the first to leave at the end of the meeting.
- Holy Harry.** Harry is so heavenly minded his fellow group members question his earthly value. He's quick with spiritual clichés and fast to spout biblical platitudes. Harry has no personal problems or struggles. His holier-than-thou attitude turns off other group members. Harry wants the group to focus on the heavenly and set aside the earthly.
- Application Alice.** "How does that apply to me?" is Alice's constant question. Spending too much time interpreting and understanding the passage doesn't please her. During Bible studies she wants to experience the text and draw out the application. For Alice, however, actually putting the application into practice isn't a big concern.
- Philosopher Phil.** Theology and philosophy are Phil's passions. He wants the group to focus on "heavy" issues. A good group, according to him, revolves around the leader who lectures on the intricacies of the biblical passage at hand. Group discussion is OK, but he prefers debating philosophical issues with the leader.
- Counselor Carol.** Carol sees the group sessions through the eyes of a counselor. She psychologizes every topic, every discussion. Group members are treated like clients in desperate need of her counsel.

- Counselee Clara.** Clara is Carol's counterpart. She wants the group to serve as a therapy session. She desperately yearns for the group to study biblical passages that may give her a solution to one of her many problems.
- Preacher Patrick.** Every group session is Patrick's pulpit. While not the official group leader, he dominates the discussion and tries to take over. Patrick is well meaning but gets on the other members' nerves. He strongly admonishes group members because he was saved out of a wild background, and now he wants to shield his friends from the agony he experienced.
- Forced Frank.** Frank doesn't have any expectations because he doesn't even want to be there. He attends only because he feels forced to do so by a demanding spouse, a craving to be accepted, or some other person or situation. Frank just wants to be left alone.

Managing Expectations

Different expectations and perspectives can cause friction among the members of your group. You must know about and be prepared to deal with these various expectations. Here are four methods to manage conflicting expectations.

First, talk about your expectations. Group members need open communication. At one of the first sessions of your group, you'd be wise to spend time talking about what each member expects from the experience. This is important because different expectations represent different needs. Not all needs can or should be met in one group. Help members evaluate their expectations in light of the purposes for which you are meeting.

Second, help group members formulate appropriate expectations. Clearly state the intended purposes for the group from the very beginning. This permits members to weigh their own expectations and make adjustments as necessary.

Third, periodically evaluate whether the group's expectations have changed with respect to the format, process, or topic. If most of the members express new expectations, it may be appropriate to add, replace, or modify intended purposes for the group.

Fourth, speak in private with individual group members. Frequently, group discussions on the topic of expectations and behavior won't produce satisfactory self-analysis. Some of us just aren't capable of evaluating our own motivations. As a result, you'll occasionally have a participant who continues to display unsuitable attitudes. Go to that person, in private, and talk it through. Typically the person is unaware of his or her behavior and is quick to make the appropriate corrections.

Are you ready?

Carefully read each of the following situations. Determine what you think the problem is and how you would handle it. Since these are examples based on my experience, there are no absolute right answers. However, to help you evaluate your responses, suggested responses follow.

1. During a lively group discussion you notice that the members are beginning to drift away from the topic you're supposed to be focusing on.
2. One group member has a tendency to speak for the whole group, saying things like "We all know that..." or "Nobody believes that..."
3. A group member asks a question, but the group moves on without considering it.
4. The group consists of 12 members, yet only 4 people take an active part in the discussion.
5. One member verbally attacks a suggestion given by another.
6. Two group members engage in a heated argument.
7. A certain group member is prone to answer all questions and comment on everything.
8. Two close friends always sit together and have numerous side discussions.
9. One person finds humor in any situation and loudly shares it with everyone.
10. The group cannot agree on the details of a proposed outing.
11. Regardless of the topic, this member turns the discussion to his problems.
12. The group is angry with a member who is constantly negative in her assessment of people's attitudes and contributions.

Possible Responses

As you have already noticed, these situations lack background and descriptive information that would help you determine appropriate responses if the cases were real. Nevertheless, here are some generic answers that suggest possible solutions. Do you agree?

Problem 1: Losing focus, drifting discussion. Politely intervene and point out the drifting tendency. Call the group back to the topic. Determine if the group wishes to change directions and pursue the new topic or schedule it for a future meeting.

Problem 2: Personal opinions projected as group opinions. Often a friendly reminder to speak only for oneself is sufficient.

Problem 3: Failure to recognize a member's contribution. Call the group back to the unresolved question. Seek an answer, or determine how and when an answer can be pursued. Affirm the questioner even though the question may not be appropriate.

Problem 4: Unbalanced participation. Here are two possible alternatives. Divide the group into smaller groups to discuss the issue, and then ask each subgroup to report to the whole group. Or conclude your question to the group by saying, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't commented yet."

Problem 5: Hostility toward someone's idea. Interrupt tactfully. Affirm the right to disagree. Remind both individuals of the participation standards you agreed upon at the outset of your group. Suggest whatever restitution is necessary to calm feelings.

Problem 6: Disagreement turns combative. Intervene using the four-step strategy for problem solving. If necessary, deal with the situation outside of the group meeting.

Problem 7: One member dominates group discussions. Talk with the person in private. Ask for his assistance in allowing others to participate. In extreme cases, while affirming the value of his participation, ask the person to consciously limit his verbal responses.

Problem 8: Members' lack of group etiquette. Redirect the two members' attention to the group activity. Ask them to share their insight with the whole group. If the behavior persists, talk with each of them outside of the group meetings.

Problem 9: Inappropriate timing and use of humor. Talk with the person in private. He may not realize the problem he's creating. You'll probably need to have more than one private discussion.

Problem 10: Disagreement over an activity. Look for a compromise solution. Compromise is legitimate when issues of choice are at stake but not in matters of doctrine. If a compromise cannot be reached, postpone the decision and look for alternatives.

Problem 11: Inappropriate expectations. Talk with the person outside of the group. Explore the possibility of securing professional counseling. Encourage the other group members to support this member outside the group meetings.

Problem 12: Conflict over personal behavior. Have the group gently confront the person with her behavior. Care must be exercised to avoid the appearance of attacking the member. Some type of interaction with the person outside the group meetings is likely.

A Problem Solver's Perspective

Finally, the prerequisite to any problem-solving strategy is a right attitude. When faced with a problem, your positive mental and emotional response is vital. Keep in mind and practice these words of the Apostle James: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.* (James 1:2-5)

This admonition isn't addressed to group leaders specifically, but the ideas certainly can be claimed by those of us who lead groups.

Let me point out three specific ideas from these verses. First, what should be my initial response to difficulties? James says "joy." Our joy is based on knowing God is in control of the situation, no matter how difficult it may seem. Second, the inevitable trials or problems associated with leading a group are important ingredients in our spiritual growth. Problems are one of the tools God uses to mold and shape our lives. And third, we can ask for God's wisdom in handling the problems our groups face, and it will be given to us.

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This is an excerpt from Neal's book *How to Lead Small Groups*. © 1990 by Neal F. McBride.

THE 6 LIFE GROUP LEADER ESSENTIALS

Articles from *SmallGroupTrader.com*. & Christianity Today International.

New Leader's Crash Course *by Adam Workman*

Are you new to small group leadership? Well rest easy friend, we've all been new to it at some point! I know first-hand that leading a small group can be intimidating. I never would have stepped up unless someone believed in me. Three years later, I was a small groups Pastor! I can't make any promises for you about a career change, but I'd like to share ten rapid-fire tips to becoming an effective small group leader. They aren't all you need to know, but they are a good start.

1. **Be a facilitator, not a teacher.**

The difference between facilitating and teaching is like the difference between the dorm room and the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher has all of the answers and does 99% of the talking. In the dorm room, discussion is valued and talking is a shared experience. Guided discussion is key to a great small group. Our desire is to guide people into self-discovery. As people see for themselves how God's Word applies to their life, it will have lasting meaning, and they will become self-feeders. Guide the discussion, but don't dominate it.

2. **Share responsibility, don't hoard it.**

Another key component to leading an effective group is sharing ministry. Allow others in the group to lead the worship time, lead the study, bring refreshments, host the group, etc. Cultivating group ownership is important if members are going to feel needed and appreciated. It also helps to keep you from burning out or from thinking that you can do it all yourself (Ephesians 4:12). Develop contributors, not customers.

3. **Be a community, not a clique.**

One thing that stood out in the early church was the love that believers had for one another. But the oneness they experienced was not an end in itself. The early church was passionate about inviting others into this new community that God was creating. Verses such as Acts 2:47, 5:42, John 13:34-35, John 17:21, Mark 3:14, bear out that what Jesus and the early church were developing was community with a cause. Be open, and invite people who are on the outside looking in into the powerful realm of true Biblical community.

4. **Depend on God, not on yourself.**

If you don't think you'd be a good small group leader, you're the perfect person for the job. God wants people who abandon themselves and trust completely in Him to work through them. As a leader, you have launched out in faith and are trusting God to do something meaningful in your life and in the lives of those you're investing in. He's responsible for transforming the lives of people; prayerfully depend upon Him to do just that.

5. **Capture moments, don't miss them.**

Remember, this is not about getting you through the curriculum; it is about getting the curriculum (more specifically the Word of God) through you. I've had the experience of being in small groups in the past where someone will share a specific need, or struggle, and the leader says, "We'll be praying about that for you." Prayer is one of the right answers, but so is compassion, which leads to action. If you or someone in your group is capable of meeting a need, meet it. If someone shares a struggle, or issue, address it. Don't simply gloss over that because you feel compelled to get through the study, or because you don't know how to respond. Respond. When the Spirit of God is moving, and people are sharing, mark those moments. Don't let them slip by.

6. **Get together often, not just once a week.**

If it is true (and I believe the biblical model proves it is) that life change is optimized in relationships, then at least one of our goals should be to build relationships with those in our small group. Meeting together once a week is really not enough. Someone said that the quality of a group meeting is determined by contacts between meetings. Get together for coffee, to hang out, contact each other through emails, phone calls, facebook, texts, etc. If you want to go deeper, you've got to invest relationally with those in your group. If you do, they will too.

7. **Model transparency, don't fake it.**

I love the saying, "If you want to know the temperature of a small group, put the thermometer in the leader's mouth." As a leader, you need to go first. If you're not modeling authenticity and transparency, don't expect others to be all that open either. Model healthy transparency and honesty for your group. Be sure that people know that this is a safe place where they can share and be real. Set the ground rule, and make sure all agree, that what people share in confidence stays in the group. Also, don't allow people to turn your time into a "gossip" or "bashing" session. Nip unhealthy patterns in the bud—and deal with the person's issue.

8. **Prepare, don't wing it.**

Expect God to do great things in your group and be sure to do your part by investing in preparation. Don't allow yourself to get into the habit of waiting until the last minute to prepare for your small group. Revise, enhance, or change questions if you think it is needed. Be creative and think of ways that you can capture people's hearts and minds as you prepare for your group.

9. **Cast vision, don't drift.**

Bill Hybels is famous for saying, "Vision leaks" because it's true. Perhaps one of the most strategic things you can do as a leader is to continually cast vision for your small group. Without regular vision casting the average small group will lose purpose and direction. Be passionate about the vision of your group; your passion will be contagious. Be creative and cast vision regularly.

10. **Make a covenant, don't neglect ground rules.**

Many problems that small groups face can be headed off by putting down on paper what the expectations for the group are and revisiting them often, as well as clearly defining the purpose/wins of the group through a covenant. It is important to state what is expected of members and to let them have input into what that should be and look like.

Think Life Change – Why we do Life Groups

Measuring Growth in Your Small Group *by Spence Shelton*

As a small group leader, and now a leader of small group leaders, I'm often asking and being asked this question, "How is your group doing?" And I often ask myself this question of the group I lead. The question is vague and can come off as nothing more than a conversational pleasantry. It assumes your reply will be "great, and yours?" This exchange of words is completely useless to a small group leader and to a leader of small group leaders. But, evaluating the spiritual maturity of your small group remains an absolutely essential task.

The first step in effectively evaluating your group is realizing it is made up of individuals. And unless you know where your individual group members are spiritually, you will make vague and usually incorrect generalizations about where your group "is." The "where" is not as much gauged on a numerical scale as much as it is observing what areas of their lives they are following Christ in. Here are some helpful identifiers for measuring spiritual growth in the lives of your group members (and also your own life):

Your Group's Prayer Lives

First, do they pray? Is prayer a 15 second dinner ritual or an intrinsic part of their daily lives? Do they pray in your small group gatherings? Do they ask you to pray for them or if they can pray for you? Basically, do they actually believe prayer to be the powerful, necessary means of communing with God or is it an unfamiliar religious practice? If they do pray, do they pray only in the form of requests for the needs of the immediate (ie, family illness or final exam) or do you hear them seeking the glory of God in their prayers? Do they praise God in their prayers? Use scripture in their prayers?

Your Group's Bible lives

The scriptures are the inspired word of God. Not you, a pastor, or anyone else can claim that for your group members. Do they love the bible? Are they regularly contributing to your group's bible study? Do they see reading the bible as a checklist task or a life necessity equal to breathing (recognize that people go through times where it may feel like a task, but do they know and believe it to be more than that)? Are they familiar with their bibles (ie: what is in the Old Testament and New Testament)? Is the bible a well-worn in tool on their belt or decorative bookshelf art? Helping people grow to love their bibles will be the single greatest thing you do for anyone in your small group.

Your Group's Ministry lives

Do they serve in the local church? Do they believe serving to be a necessary part of their Christian life or a guilt-motivated job assignment? Do they like people? This is not asking if they are extroverted, but if they have a general care for the welfare of fellow Christians as well as non Christians. Do others around them know they are Christians? Does the gospel influence their work ethic and the way they interact with those around them?

Your Group's Financial lives

Uh oh! The big scary! Listen, this one is easy, but must be approached with grace and humility (and don't single out an individual on this during group time). Jesus very shrewdly pointed out (Matt 6 and Luke 12) that what you do with your money is an indicator of what you value. Do the people in your group value Jesus and therefore give of their money to the local church as an expression of that? If they do, do they enjoy giving? Depending on your group, you may consider looking into a focused small group study on financial planning.

These identifiers for measuring spiritual growth in your small group are not exhaustive and can be used wrongly if not done with humility and grace.

***Four Ways Small Group Leaders are Spiritual Leaders* by Joshua Griffin**

In my opinion, the first and most important role of any small group leader is that he or she is a spiritual leader:

WALK WITH GOD: Active in your faith and a growing believer

We expect small group leaders to be spending time with God, praying and modeling the spiritual disciplines. We give plenty of grace for the ups and downs of walking with Christ, but expect leadership to be growing on their own. Most importantly, we desire hearts that are sensitive to God's leading and Spirit.

IN COMMUNITY YOURSELF: Pursuing healthy, godly friendships and relationships

Just like we challenge students to join a small group – it would make sense that we value this as adults as well. We realize this is an additional commitment and possibly another night out of the week, but modeling community is critical as a growing adult.

MODEL: Actively pursuing accountability in your life

The small group leader has to have healthy accountability in his or her life.

FAITHFUL: Attend a regular church service

Church attendance is also important in the life of a small group leader. We are part of our church and want to be connected to the vision and direction of our senior pastor. At the same time, we realize that small groups are a pouring out, and we need to be continually filled up as well— church plays a role there for sure.

Cultivate Relationships – How we build Community

How to Model Authenticity- *by Reid Smith*

1. **When you ask a question, be ready to be the first to answer it.** It helps to prepare for this by knowing the actual questions and order of questions you plan to present during your group's bible study and discussion time. Two rules of thumb to follow:

- The earlier the better – plan to share more personally toward the beginning of your group's discussion time because this will encourage more open communication throughout.
- Think through your personal responses – the more prepared you are to answer...the more ready you will be to take risks. So as you review discussion questions in advance of your group's gathering, imagine through how you would answer each and consider how you can be transparent.

2. **Slow and steady** – 'planned authenticity' is not an oxymoron. Generally speaking, the more you know people the more open you can be. It's better to be gradual in a group dynamic when people don't know each other. For example, baring your soul in the first gathering of a new group dynamic could scare some people off. Note the natural progression of Jesus' openness in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). You can be strategic in self-revelation while being led by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

3. **Don't wait too long.** The pace of the leader...the pace of the group. If you want honest conversation you need to be honest yourself and it's better to do this toward the beginning of your group's season / study together.

4. **Communicate truth and your personal response to it.** People like to know what other people think and how they feel in response to something. When you as the leader can express both, it invites others to new levels of participation. It's good leadership to tell your group how you agree with a biblical principle that's being taught but also share the challenges you face in living out your faith. For example, *"It's so important to have a devotional time each day, but there are seasons when I struggle with this...lately, I've let other things take priority in my life and I want this to change. Please pray for me."* Though some might view this as vulnerability that shows weakness, it is the exact opposite. Here's what it shows:

- A truth: Spending time with God each day is important to our spiritual growth
- You're human: Nobody is perfect and does what is right all the time
- You want what God wants: To develop your relationship with the Lord
- You need help like everyone else to respond in faith: We need God and community for life-transformation

5. **Grace unlocks authenticity.** Grace has a way of drawing out authenticity. Conversations about God's amazing grace and our dependency on Christ have a way of encouraging authenticity. The more discussion is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, the more free people will be to tell the truth about who they are and where they're at in their relationship with God and other people. Point people to Christ and express how we're all equally in need of grace; nobody is more or less in need of grace than any other person. Leveling the playing field and equalizing our need for grace releases realness in your group participants.

6. **Err on the side of risk.** It is not unusual to have thoughts you question sharing. In your own mind, ask the Lord to help you discern if there is any reason why you should NOT share something that might be vulnerable or feel like a risk. Your authenticity is most effectively communicated when you put your personal interests aside and take risks for those listening.

7. **Share what you really value and love even if you think those around you may not apprehend or accept what you say.**

8. **Don't spin.** When you get something wrong, acknowledge it openly and maintain a positive attitude versus trying to put a positive spin on your mistake. Be real without being hard on yourself. Beating yourself up for getting something wrong raises the stakes for others to share openly. With a smile on your face, simply share what you thought, that you learned differently, and you're glad that you did!

9. **Forgiveness nourishes authentic relationships – Unforgiveness disables authenticity.** We don't hold onto grudges...they hold onto us. Grudges and unforgiveness toward others (whether they're a part of the group or not) erect barriers in relationships and make it more difficult to be authentic. Lack of forgiveness = lack of authenticity. It is imperative for us to be right with people if we want to be real with others.

Promote Participation – How you lead a group

8 Essential Traits of a Small Group Facilitator *by Reid Smith*

Eight traits should be evident in people serving as small group facilitators.

A First-Class Small Group Facilitator Is Somebody Who Is...

Loving. The most important requirement for somebody who wants to serve as a small group facilitator is that they hold in their heart The Greatest Commandment: Love for God and people (Mark 12:29-31). When people's leadership is sourced out of this love and shared with others, they are bound to be strong and successful. There is no better bonding agent than love. When group participants feel loved by the facilitator, they would not want any other facilitator in the world even if he were more confident in his leadership ability or more competent in his understanding of God's Word. Just as love covers over a multitude of sins so love covers over a multitude of misgivings that facilitators might have about their own skills.

Prayerful. Prayer is essential to our communion with God and others. It overflows from the small group facilitator's love for God and people. Prayer expresses our dependence on the Lord, mediates the flow of His grace into the small group, strengthens our receptivity to the Holy Spirit's guidance and teaching, and it shields the group from the enemy's attacks (Eph 6:18; 1 Thes 5:17). Make no mistake: A person who is serving as a small group facilitator is at war with the devil who wants to throw apart what God has set apart (made holy) in order to bring together (1 Pet 2:9, 5:8). God will powerfully reveal His faithfulness to the group when small group facilitators demonstrate their faithfulness in their role through prayer.

Humble. This is a key attribute to a person who imitates Christ's example (Php 2:3-5). It allows the small group facilitator to hear from the Lord, receive His wisdom, serve others, and model spiritual intimacy with the Lord. They prioritize the needs of others above their own desires and agenda. Most people can only be themselves when they feel safe and a safe environment is born out of humble leadership – truth and trust go hand-in-hand. Humble people have a way of disarming others and helping them to be truthful about who they are and where they need spiritual encouragement. This trait also communicates that all of us are equally in need of God's grace, i.e. that one person is not better than the other nor is he loved any less by God. Finally, humility is a reflection that one is teachable, which people need to be if they are going to hear from the Lord and truly partner with others in building biblical community.

Authentic. Authenticity is essential to the success of a small group facilitator. People will not put up long with a small group where people are not real with each other – they have better things to spend their time doing each week. Arguably, the greatest influence on the dynamic of a small group is how real the small group facilitator is with the group participants. The health of a small group can be directly linked to how free people feel they can be with one another. People want to go someplace where they are loved for who they are rather than who they feel they have to be. Demonstrated vulnerability from the facilitator has tremendous “imprinting power” that ensures the health of the group for the life of the group. Authenticity creates life-giving community which is essential for the development of evangelism and discipleship.

Inclusive. Effective small group facilitators convene and care for people. They intentionally draw in participants to the Bible study discussion and include them in prayer because they know this enhances their spiritual growth. They find ways to play to people's strengths and involve them in service and outreach initiatives because they know this expands the richness of the group to those in need of God's life-changing grace. They look for ways to give everybody a voice and a purpose to fulfill within the group because they know that building biblical community takes all the parts working together (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12, 25-27). Small group facilitators who are inclusive resist the temptation to be guarded about the dynamic of their group and instead trust the Lord with those He wants to gather to Himself. Shepherds are to protect their flocks from decreasing because of wolves, not increasing due to more sheep.

Encouraging. Everyone needs encouragement somewhere in his life (1 Thes. 5:11, 14). The small group facilitator will most likely be the primary catalyst for gathering people in Jesus' name and inspiring the group participants to use their gifts to build up one another (1 Cor 12:7). Encouragement is a crucial trait in calling out people's gifts and calling them into service, which is why the Apostle Paul was a consummate encourager. This trait enables people to hear God's Word for their lives and helps them to see themselves the way that God sees them (Eph 4:29). People respond positively to people with positive attitudes. Hope and faith exude from somebody who is encouraging while a discouraging person dampens these qualities in others. A splash of humor does not hurt either; it does not require wit as much as an ability to look optimistically at life and its challenges. Like humility, encouragement has convening power that uplifts people and builds up the group.

Consistent. It is vital for small group facilitators to follow-through on what they say they will do. Showing integrity in word and action creates structural integrity for group-life (Titus 2:6-8). For example, if the facilitator promises to pray for someone and that he will check-in a couple days later... he must do it. Otherwise, it disheartens the participant and demolishes one of the pillars that biblical community is built upon: Trust. The old adage of “do what you say and say what you mean” is a maxim for life and group facilitation too. Your consistency reveals your commitment and ensures group participants that they can rely on you as you do life together.

A Good Listener. Communication is key, but listening is the key to good communication (Jms 1:19). One of the best ways small group facilitators can love on the people in their group is to really listen to them. Listening to others shows respect and increases their sense of self-worth within the group (Eph 4:25-32). This builds a greater sense of cohesion (or bonding) among group participants. Cohesion brings encouragement and motivation for true discipleship. As a group's cohesion increases so does its level of communication, positive interactivity and spontaneous touch-points among all members.

10 Tips on How to Introduce People to Group Prayer *by Reid Smith*

Praying in a group can be intimidating for those who haven't done it before. You'd be surprised how many people are not used to praying out loud with other people around them listening in. This is an important skill for all believers to develop because agreement in prayer among two or more believers makes God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven and builds the community of His Church (Matthew 18:19-20). Here are some tips that will help you to ease people who are unfamiliar with group prayer into this very important spiritual practice:

1. **Be brief.** Brevity can reduce the anxiety level in group prayer because it allows time for others to pray and serves as a model for simplicity in prayer (Matthew 5:7-13). People who aren't use to praying aloud in a group will see short and simple as something they can do too.
2. **Be informal.** Don't have a big build-up. When it's time to pray, just begin. For example, "Okay everyone, let's pray. Feel free to jump in if you'd like. Lord, we..." This makes prayer feel less intimidating and more natural.
3. **Be yourself.** Imagine God sitting across from you in the group and talk with Him like you would a person (after-all God is fully human and He is actually in your midst). Have a conversational flow to what you share with the Lord and avoid Christian clichés or complex theological jargon.
4. **Use Scripture.** Invite people to articulate their prayer with biblical passages. They can read something that is meaningful to them and then say, "I believe that about..." or "Let that be true for..." and reference their own prayer need or one that was shared by another group member.
5. **Invite the most confident to lead.** There is usually at least one person in every group who tends to be more forthright in prayer or they're good about summarizing multiple prayer needs. At the beginning of your next group meeting, ask them how they'd feel about facilitating the prayer time. If they're open to doing this, reassure them by saying, "Just be yourself...you'll be great!"
6. **Don't call on anybody.** Some people are terrified to pray in front of others, and if they're newer to the group, they may not return if you put them on the spot.
7. **Don't go in a circle.** This puts people who don't want to pray aloud in an embarrassing situation, especially if they're the only one to pass.
8. **Go first in sharing a personal prayer request.** This primes the pump for others to share and sets an example of vulnerability.
9. **Appoint somebody to write down prayer requests.** Then follow-up on them at your next gathering. This cultivates a warm and caring environment that will help people feel safer about personally engaging in group prayer.
10. **Integration.** Discussing prayer needs outside of the time allotted for prayer in your next gathering can help to integrate prayer more into your group-life. This helps group prayer feel more as a natural part of your group-life as opposed to an isolated or add-on component.

Replace Yourself – How to Intentionally Apprentice

Encouragement Tips: Raising up New Leaders *by Louie Lovoy*

For some reason, the idea of raising up a new leader from within your group really overwhelms some leaders. It's not as difficult as you might think. Others of you just don't see the value in it. Please understand, you may not think this a big deal but it is huge! Enabling others and raising up new leaders is important for so many reasons:

1. **You are being obedient!** Jesus' command to all of his followers is to make disciples by teaching them everything that He has taught us.

2. **You are helping others to grow!** When you give someone else the opportunity to lead, you are giving them an opportunity to grow! Nothing stretches us quite like assuming a new level of spiritual responsibility.

3. **You are building the church!** As your church continue to open its doors wide to the people of your community, you are going to need to have more and more leaders waiting in the wings, ready to lead new groups that will give disconnected people a place to experience community and spiritual growth!

With this in mind, a great idea might be to invite others in your group to facilitate the discussion from time to time. However, here are some tips for asking others to facilitate your group's discussion:

1. **Ask them privately.** Never just end your group time by saying, "If anyone else wants to facilitate, let me know!" If you give a general appeal, you will get a general response. Instead, pull someone aside individually or give them a call and say, "Hey John, I think that you would do a great job facilitating our group. Can you facilitate for us 2 weeks from now on Nov. 7th?"

2. **Ask them for a specific date.** Don't just leave it open ended because it will never happen. Get it on the calendar.

3. **Ask them how you can help them.** After they say yes, don't just throw them to the wolves; make sure you help them to prepare. Call them the week of and try to answer any questions they might have. Make sure that you are there the day they lead for the first time. Don't just get them to fill in when you are not there. That way, you can give them helpful feedback and your group will not just view them as a "back up."

Well, that's about as practical as it gets! By pouring yourselves into others and producing spiritual fruit in their lives, you will be storing up treasure in heaven. You can do it!

Five Reasons You Need an Apprentice

Apprentices are priceless—here's why. *By Michael C. Mack*

1. Having an apprentice in your group is one of the best strategies for evangelism and growth available to the church. In order to bring new people into your group (and the church), you need trained leaders. But where will these leaders come from? If every small group has an apprentice, you'll always have leaders in training. Just as an intern trains in the hospital under a doctor, an apprentice trains in the group under the leader. When adequately prepared, the apprentice forms the nucleus of a new group (or remains with the original group while the leader births the new group).

2. When a group births a new group, the members feel responsible for that group, like proud parents. When that group in turn produces yet another group, members of the first group feel like grandparents, a true sense of accomplishment.

3. Some of the leader's usual functions can be delegated to the apprentice; thus the leader can focus on just a few key responsibilities. But remember, the apprentice is not just a "go-for" person; he or she is there to learn.
4. Leaders don't get burned out so fast with apprentices in the group. Two reasons: First, the leader becomes more than just a discussion facilitator; he becomes a trainer, a discipler if you will. This helps bring additional meaning to the leadership capacity. Second, because the group should birth a new group every so often, there is a continuing sense of excitement-there's simply no time for burnout!
5. The apprenticing process imitates God's idea of leadership development. There is a fifth reason for apprenticing small group leaders, perhaps the most important of all. That is, God calls us to leadership and equips us to be leaders; thus He has an apprenticing style of ministry. Think about it: God could do all of the work necessary to sustain and grow the church by Himself. But from the beginning of time, He chose not only to apprentice leaders, but to work His will through them. As Gareth Icenogle notes several times in *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), the human approach is to centralize and hoard; God's approach is to decentralize and empower.

Provide Care –How you Handle Tough Situations

Encouragement Tips: Leading Small Groups through Difficult Subjects *by Louie Lovoy*

Have you ever been scared to death because you have to lead your Small Group in a discussion dealing with sex, money, or some other touchy subject? Here are five things to remember as you navigate a difficult subject with your group:

1. **Acceptance is Essential** – Begin each group time by setting the tone that no one is perfect and that no one is going to be judged by you or anyone else in the group. We have all messed up in different ways, and small group has to be a safe place for people to be real, honest, and transparent. People have to know that they can admit their faults and still be accepted.
2. **Demand Confidentiality** – Remind everyone each week that what is said in the group stays in the group. The last thing people need to worry about is whether or not their business is going to be circulating throughout the community because the people in their group can't keep their mouths closed.
3. **Resources are Available** – As people open up and issues emerge, direct people to the many books, websites, and resources that are available. There is tons of material out there that have been written by people that are a lot smarter than you and me. Find it and tell your group where they can get it.
4. **You are not Dr. Phil** – There may be some issues that come up that neither you nor your group are equipped to deal with and should not even try. Do not be afraid to encourage people to seek professional counseling for deep relational issues and addictions. Your job as a group and a group leader is to love and support people as they go through counseling, not to be that counseling.
5. **Pray!** – Ultimately, all of these touchy subjects are spiritual issues! Be in prayer for yourself and for your group. As leaders, you are going to be under attack. You are going to face temptation like never before. Ask God to protect you as you tackle this issue. Also, pray for your group. I really believe that tackling these kinds of subjects gives the potential for you and your group to have life-changing breakthroughs! You can do it!

How to Handle Major Tragedies (death, suicide, cancer) in Your Group *by Lynette & Philip Kittle*

Major tragedies such as death, suicide, cancer or other terminal diseases are some of the most important opportunities for ministry within a small group. There are times when the survivors of the tragedy need care and support—probably more than any other time in their lives. Along with experiencing great loss, they may go through times of hopelessness, anger, fear, and a range of emotions. It's a time when the core of their faith in God may be greatly shaken and tested.

As a small group leader it's helpful to know that the more unexpected the death, the greater the grief and sense of blame or responsibility may occur. Reassurance that the loss was not the family members' fault is critical especially in situations of suicide, where people may believe they could have prevented it.

Ways to Respond

Encourage group members to reach out by offering a listening ear, a hand to hold, and prayer. Just sitting and being with family members during times of devastation and grief offers comfort and support. Also, let members know it's not a time to try and figure out for the grieving why something happened or to offer grief clichés, which usually only add to the feelings of hopelessness, sorrow, and loss.

Instruct members that grieving and bereavement is a process. And although time doesn't heal grief, grieving does take time. Often, people just need to talk. The most helpful thing to do is to listen and let people communicate about their loss. Encourage those grieving to talk about their deceased loved one, asking them to share memories and photos.

Carefully choose to say words that help like:

- I'm sorry your loved one (wife, husband, sibling, parent, child) died.
- Tell me about your loved one.
- What was your loved one like?
- What do you miss the most?
- I care about you.
- I'm thinking about you today because I know it's your loved ones birthday (holiday, anniversary of death, etc.).
- I'm here to listen or talk.

Additionally, teach people in the group to avoid well-meaning statements such as, "He or she is in a better place" or "God must have needed your loved one in Heaven." Intellectually and spiritually, a person may know their loved one is with God, understanding it's a wonderful place, but emotionally, they are lonely, hurting, and missing their loved one. Although statements like that may be true, when a woman has just lost her husband, or parents their child, these types of statements may cause anger with God and alienate them from His comfort.

Try to avoid words that hurt such as:

- I know how you feel.
- I know just how you feel because my pet died.
- You'll get over it.
- Don't think about it.
- Don't cry.
- Be strong.

- You're better off without them.
- You should feel relieved.
- Forget about it.
- Tears won't bring them back.
- It's your fault.
- If only you had....

Practical Ways to Help

As a group leader, understand that grieving people are vulnerable and may benefit from someone who has experience in funeral arrangements to help them in the details. See if there's someone in the group who has experience in end-of-life arrangements or knows someone who can help. It's a time when people may need assistance to make sure they aren't taken advantage of by funeral homes and even well-meaning people, who may suggest they donate items or money before they've had time to process their loss.

Also, communicate to your group that a person who experiences a major tragedy may feel numb, unable to function and carry on simple daily routines. Encourage small group members to be there for them by sending cards, giving monetary gifts to help with expenses, bringing meals, offering child care if needed, assisting in bill paying, doing general housekeeping help such as cleaning, or stocking the house with groceries and household items. Ask for a volunteer within the group to coordinate a schedule so members aren't all showing up at the same time or all doing the same task. Practical help is one of the most effective ways to minister to people during times of sorrow because it meets basic needs and also communicates an unconditional type of love.

In the weeks and months to follow, a leader can be sensitive to planning activities. If a member has lost a spouse, instead of couples night out, try having a "Guy's Night Out" for a widower or "Girl's Night Out" for a widow. Gradually bring the grieving member back into couples gatherings to help ease the realization that they are no longer part of a couple.

Be There

As a leader of a small group there can be a fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, which can result in a tendency to hold back. But major tragedies offer some of the greatest opportunities to express the love of God, and offer His comfort and support to grieving members.

If you're uncomfortable or unfamiliar in dealing with tragic situations, don't be afraid to ask your pastor or someone in the group who may have more experience, for counsel in how to minister and meet a member's need. Also, consider calling a local hospice or Christian crisis center to speak with a chaplain or counselor who can provide informative resources for the group members.

Equipped for Ministry

Major tragedies seem to touch the lives of most people whether it's through a loved one, extended family members, friends, co-workers, or in the community. Even national tragic events like experienced on September 11 deeply affect lives. During these distressful times, many individuals are desperately seeking God's comfort.

Consider inviting an expert in death and dying to speak to your small group leaders or to your individual group. Help provide needed tools before a tragedy strikes. By doing so, your leaders and members will not only be equipped to minister to group members when a crisis arises, but also to their families, friends, co-workers, and communities.

Multiply Influence – How you Maximise Influence

How to Give Away Your Small Group

A new strategy for trauma-free multiplication *by Joe Windham*

Many people in the small-group world have searched for a way to multiply groups without causing a lot of relational trauma and fear. I don't have a universal answer, of course, but the best way I've found to do this is by training up an assistant leader and then giving away the small group to them.

The Idea

My wife and I have done this numerous times as leaders of married couples groups. From our very first meeting, we let our new small group know our belief that, over time (usually six months to a year), God is going to raise one of them up to take over the leadership of the group. We emphasize that we're not in a hurry to make this change, but we do believe it will happen over time. Because when something is healthy, it naturally grows. After planting this visional seed, we make sure to water it often with prayer, encouragement, and support.

At a recent Vision Night for our church's small-groups ministry, I shared this approach to multiplication with all of our group leaders. It was very well received, and afterward we had all the group leaders in attendance write down the names of any potential leaders from their group on a 3 x 5 card. We directed them to put these cards in their Bibles and begin praying over them. We also had each leader come forward and write the names down on large flip pads so that our coaches and staff could spend some time praying over them, as well.

Since that night, we have had numerous leaders let us know that they are already preparing to give their group away and start something new. And each of our small-group coaches are now tracking where their leaders are in the process of giving their groups away, and how they can help them do so effectively.

Another positive aspect of the "give away your group" strategy is that it teaches a group to have a missional sense of purpose. Not only do groups meet weekly to do study and fellowship, but they're to pray weekly over who God is going to raise up next. We also encourage each group to pray for their original leaders as they branch out to start a new group. In fact, many of our groups have a special "sending out" night where they pray for the leaders as they launch out to start their new group. It's an exciting time of celebration.

I believe the reason this approach is so successful is because group leaders intuitively fear the trauma that traditional multiplication causes—and are relieved to have a less stressful and damaging method of growth. Another reason this strategy works so well is because it's easy. The new group leader already has relationships with everyone in the group, which means the group can just continue on as normal. When any leader receives the simple steps I've listed below, they actually believe it to be something they can do.

The Strategy

Here are the basic steps involved in the "give away your group" method of multiplication:

1. **Share the vision with your small group.** Let the group know you are praying that God will raise up someone within the group to take over its leadership in the future. Let them know you're not in a hurry, but you believe God has a plan for growth.
2. **Pray for and identify potential leaders.** Pray regularly that God would reveal people in your group who have the potential for leadership, and try to identify at least one person or couple in your group that has what it takes to lead the small group effectively.
3. **Look for the Five C's as confirmation.** Those C's are: Character, Competence, Chemistry, Consistency, and Caring. You want a replacement for your group who is on time, who has great character, who you get along with, who is a great listener, and who is caring, and who demonstrates a shepherding heart.

4. **Make contact.** Invite the potential leader(s) to get together and talk about the idea of leading the group. Affirm the 5 C's you've observed in them, and share that you're praying they would consider taking over leadership of the group. Then listen to their response. If they respond positively, move on to the final steps.
5. **Have them host in their home.** Ask the potential leader(s) to lead the group and host it in their home as a trial period, then meet with them afterward.
6. **Choose a date to make the give away.** Find out when they would like to take over leadership, and then announce that to the rest of the group.
7. **Plan a launch party.** Have the small group "pray you out" as you look to start your brand new group. Celebrate the successes of your time with the group and the potential for ministry that exists going forward.
8. **Start your new group.**

—Joe Windham is Executive Pastor of Small Groups at Grace Family Church in Lutz, Florida.

The Worthwhile Risk of Being Missional *by Reid Smith*

Did you know that outreach has a way of actually turning small groups inside out? Struggling groups and small group ministries have found help not by focusing on their own internal issues, but by looking beyond their problems and giving attention to the needs of those beyond their immediate relational circles. This article will present how missions benefits small groups and how small groups can reach out together.

First let's define what is meant by the terms "mission" and "missional." *Mission* is the intentional crossing of boundaries from faith to non-faith to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of Jesus Christ. *Missional* is a way of describing the thinking, nature, and behavior of Christian churches, organizations, and believers whose intention, passion, or goals seek to introduce unbelievers to the person of Jesus Christ.

I have given my life to building the community life of churches through small groups because they are essential to empowering God's people in mission. Small groups aren't meant to create new comfort zones for people. Rather, their purpose is to embolden believers to go beyond their comfort zones to do things they never imagined doing. Every group can find a way to be missional in a manner that is natural for its own unique group dynamic. To not do so is a big miss. Tragic really.

The Problem with being inwardly focused

There's a natural slide for small groups to become inwardly focused. Many small group leaders have unknowingly adopted a certain kind of thinking that's protective and territorial. Leaders may believe that their group doesn't have the time or capacity to reach beyond their own relationship needs and issues.

But the group-life that results from this mindset is contrary to the nature and purpose of the body of Christ. Groups that remain self-focused eventually fall apart because of the dynamic that's already been created from being inwardly focused for too long.

God wants every believer to share His grace with the world around them (2 Cor. 5:17-20), so how could small groups not be utilized evangelistically? I encourage all groups to reach out. I don't prescribe how groups should reach out. Instead, I present different opportunities that appeal to different kinds of groups depending on their make-up and focus. I might take more of a campaign-style approach and present something church-wide during some seasons.

What does Missions do for small groups?

Mission builds up group participants and benefits small groups. Communicating these insights about small groups and missions to people in groups provides the explanation and encouragement they need to push outward to the edge of their comfort zones. Small group missions – both near and far...

- Enable believers to reach out in ways they couldn't do if it were left up to them alone.
- Enlarge the potential to make connections with people already in our sphere of influence because it gives us a new social network to work through.
- Provide platforms for invitational evangelism and ready-to-go outreach teams for missions that help believers enter into new territory and cultures for Christ.
- Bonds a group together in ways that groups with a pure diet of Bible study does not (James 1:22-25).
- Ensures group-life is well-rounded, helping believers to be well-rounded too.
- Provides a way to take your church's community-life beyond the four walls of your church building so that your surrounding community can see the love of God with skin on it (John 13:35; 1 John 4:12).
- Allow believers to "go deeper" in their understanding of God's Word more than if one were to give their attention solely to Bible study.
- Results in stories of life-transformation that inspire others to use their time and resources to reach out and make a difference in the lives of others.
- Brings new believers into God's Kingdom and the group, which the Lord always uses to refresh and enliven a group dynamic.

Making Room for New People

God blesses groups that look for ways to show His lost children the way home – He will make room if we make room (Luke 15:10, 22-24). He inspires new growth in us when we expand the relational circle of our group-life to touch the lives of others. In Luke 17:33, Jesus says, *"Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."* This same economy of the Kingdom applies to a small group's community-life and how open it chooses to be to missional thinking and action.

Sometimes people feel like the presence of newcomers will negatively affect the friendship-forming happening in their group. This is a myth. When a group takes a protective (territorial) posture when it comes to its size or acceptance of newcomers, it suffocates itself. A group needs to breathe. New participants feed a group's dynamic like oxygen feeds fire. They bring new life to the group. Consider this: There are more options for dealing with challenges that come with growth than there are in dealing with the problems of decline.

Prayer that is Externally-focused

There are many ways small groups can engage in local or cross-cultural missions. Ask the Lord how He wants to use you and your group in missions. Start with prayer and think in baby-steps. Your group probably won't start with organizing its own mission trip halfway around the world. But most people are open and ready to begin praying for the people in their lives who don't yet know Christ. An externally-focused prayer has a way of cultivating missional hearts.

Prayer also ignites brainstorming about outreach. This is critical to do in the group and with the group. Small group leaders can bring options, but more importantly, they should involve everyone in the process of determining how the group can expand its circle of influence together. Take time to share the benefits of outreach, answer questions, and give everyone a part to play in organizing how to engage in missions together.

Making a Difference Near and Far (adapted for Australian context)

The Lord will show your group how it can make a difference near and far. You might begin by thinking through what constitutes Jerusalem (local-citywide), Judea (citywide-regional), Samaria (statewide-countrywide), and the ends of the earth (countrywide-worldwide) for your group (Acts 1:8). What does each sphere look like and what opportunities exist within each?

Ask the group to come up with examples for each sphere. I have found excellent ideas from servantevangelism.com, kindness.com, or serve-others.com. For guidance on how a church can engage in cross-cultural/global outreach through its small groups see thepeaceplan.com.

There are a variety of ways your group can reach out together:

- **Invitational** – Invite your friends to your group and your church.
- **Event-based** – Link your group outreach to your church events and serve together during the weekend services or for special outreach events.
- **Community service** – Go to <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/> or <http://www.foodbank.com.au/default.asp> Identify needs in your community that touch your group's heart and then serve together (e.g. community clean-up day, providing school supplies for underprivileged kids, food delivery, helping the homeless, etc.).
- **Sponsorship** – Support a child ([compassion.com](http://www.compassion.com)), a family or village (<http://www.mercy-international.com/index.html>)
- **Focused Prayer** – adopt a people group in prayer (Solomon Islands, Burma etc...).
- **Mission trips** – Contact your church's pastoral leadership team and share that your group would like to go on a mission trip together. Learn about what your church is already doing and get a couple of recommendations on organizations that can help with planning it.

Step Outside Safe Boundaries

Growth is a good thing. People naturally think of it as being a positive. Yet the road we need to travel to get there sometimes feels very unnatural and even negative. Missions carry this kind of weight in the hearts of many and creates an unpleasant tug-of-war on their insides. However, when we overcome this resistance and serve those on the other side of our world (figuratively or literally), we discover new passion and purpose in our lives and our groups.

Recently, our church partnered with a missions organization to send two teams to Nicaragua's capital city dump. In this dump lived thousands of families. Most children never stepped outside the landfill and they end up on drugs or are forced into prostitution so they and their families can survive. In response to this desperate situation, our church partnered with a missions agency and raised money to build a house of hope on the outskirts of the dump where kids could live, learn, laugh, and grow in Christ.

Our church came back with new eyes and hearts, filled with a desire to go back and serve. Their stories continue to touch the hearts of our church community, inspiring others to go. Our members are being inspired to reach out locally and some are also adopting kids out of the dump. People who aren't a part of our church, including nonbelievers have also contacted us wanting to join our teams for next year's trips.

Missions have a way of multiplying people to make a difference in the lives of others. For example, one small group in our church is going to Nicaragua this month. Their group recently birthed a new group out of its existing one so when the other 'half' heard of what they were planning they wanted to go too! The group leaders actually had to create a lottery system to decide who was going to go.

The Worthwhile Risk

Small group missions is not only about reaching those outside of our groups, it's about reaching those inside of our groups so they can discover things within themselves they would have never found if they hadn't ventured beyond their comfort zones. Your small group members and the many lives – near and far – that will be touched through their self-giving love makes overstepping the bounds of what feels safe and familiar a worthwhile risk for everyone involved.