



## **SMALL GROUPS**

### **PURPOSE OF SMALL GROUPS**

Community or fellowship is deeply grounded in the nature of God. It flows from who God is. When we look at the early church, we observe small communities of people who followed Jesus together. This included meeting in the temple and from house to house (Acts 2:46). Believers engaged in life together. They spent time together eating, singing, learning, praying and praising God.

In our modern culture, small groups are often viewed as a program within the church. However, for the church we read about in Acts, it was a way of life. Small groups should therefore be part of our DNA – being church not doing church.

Small groups create biblical community that allows people to engage with one another for the purpose of becoming more like Jesus. Therefore, regardless of the nature of the group (men's meeting, recovery group or Bible study) the ultimate purpose is for people to become mature in the Lord. "Each other" is a very prominent phrase in the New Testament: forgive each other, pray for each other, regard each other more highly than yourself, love one another, serve one another and the list goes on. Community is God's design for growth.

### **SMALL GROUP LEADER**

A strong small group starts with a person willing to accept the call to lead and willing to grow in leadership. If you take a weak man and you put the best armour on him, he will still be a weak soldier. In Ephesians 6, when Paul discusses the armour of God, he firstly says, "be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" and then you must "take up the whole armour of God". Just like David, it is important for us to strengthen ourselves in the Lord (Sam 30:6). It is vital that we grow in our relationship with God. Paul encouraged Timothy in the following manner: "Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to

yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you; (1 Timothy 4:15-16). Being a strong leader does not mean that you need certain qualifications or that you should be a Christian for a certain number of years. Being a leader, means that people are following you. Therefore, make sure that you are diligently following Jesus so that you can lead people toward a deeper relationship with Him.

Now that we have established that it is critical for the leader to be strong in the Lord, let's look at some tips or tools available for a leader in hosting an effective small group.

## **HOSTING AN EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUP**

### **PREPARATION**

1. **Prayer** – No matter how gifted or mature we are, ultimately our strength is spiritual. It is critical that we rely on the direction of the Holy Spirit every step of the way. Paul says to the Corinthians “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase; (1 Corinthians 3:6)”. Make time to pray for the members of your small group sometime during the week; pray for the meeting itself; pray for the Holy Spirit to make you sensitive to His direction during the meeting; also pray for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of people who have been invited to join. This point cannot be emphasised enough.
2. **Find the best fit** – There are several options depending on various factors such as ages, location, time constraints, purpose of the group etc. Try to find the best fit. A few examples –
  - Young Adults (a group of young working adults, married or single, but no kids)
  - Families with small kids
  - Ladies only
  - Single ladies only
  - Men only
  - Recovery group
  - Support groups, such as divorce care
  - Youth

- People grouped together by location
  - Mix – if you particularly want to encourage community among all ages
3. **Location** – Create a comfortable environment for people. It is always great if people can meet in the home of the leader, but this is not always practical or possible. In a spread-out community such as Hazyview, driving distance, financial constraints and safety at night play a role as well.
  4. **Planning** – don't wing it. You can lead a great group without a lot of preparation, but you need a deliberate plan.
  5. **Snacks** – Snacks can lighten the initial burden of conversation. People are often more comfortable to talk with a cup in their hand. It's also easier to focus when you aren't distracted by hunger or thirst. Snacks do not need to be extravagant. Simple coffee and rusks are completely sufficient. Be aware of creating expectations or loading a burden on yourself. Remember you can share the responsibility of providing the snacks, but just be sensitive to people's financial situations.
  6. **Communication** – confirm the details with your members and potential group members, even if they already know. Make it a practice to send out reminder messages. It helps people to keep the meeting in their thoughts and plans.

## MEETING

1. **Share your purpose** – especially in the first meeting, share the purpose of the group and your vision for its future. This will nurture healthy expectations and ease uncertainties. It is also great to ask people what their expectations are. You can perhaps even write this down and review the answers and follow up with people.
2. **Time** – honour your time commitments. If people committed to 90 minutes, then do your best to keep to that time. Should the meeting run longer due to ministering needs, make it easy for those that need to go to slip out.
3. **Icebreakers** – Icebreakers are great activities for people to get to know one another or to warm up potentially cold and stiff meetings. They are intended to be used to encourage people to participate in the meeting and to engage with one another. They are also a great way of introducing people to the content of the meeting. You do not necessarily need to announce that you

are going to do an Icebreaker. An Icebreaker can be structured in a manner to feel conversational. For example, let's say you are going to discuss a book of the Bible that people generally find very boring, you can ask the following: "Today we are going to discuss a book of the Bible that people generally do not enjoy reading. I'm curious, what book of the Bible do you struggle to get into and why?"

4. **Prayer** – Be sensitive to where people are. Prayer can pull people in, or it can be a barrier that keep people out. For example, when you are leading an outreach type of group or a group of newly converted Christians, it may create a religious atmosphere when you start the meeting with prayer. In such meetings, it can help to rather pray at the end of the meeting. In other settings, starting with prayer is part of the DNA. Some people feel extremely uncomfortable to pray in front of other people so be very sensitive to not just nominate someone to open or close in prayer.
5. **Don't talk too much**, unless that is the nature of the small group - Make the talking time more about discussion and less about a chance for one person to preach to everyone else. Ask yourself whether it is a group discussion or a lesson. For instance, Bible Life is primarily a lesson, whereas small groups meeting in homes would mostly be discussions. People tend to learn better when they are actively involved. Each person has unique experiences and valuable insights to add to the discussion. Small groups flourish on healthy participation.
6. **Facilitate the discussion** – if someone says something unbiblical, steer the conversation in a loving manner in the right direction, without dismissing the person. Don't embarrass anyone. If for example, conversation has touched on baptism and someone says they were christened as a baby and that's the same thing, you can for example say something like this: "I can understand how that can be confusing. At Church Unlimited we believe in a baptism of repentance. I would love to talk to you more about this and hear your heart, but for the sake of the rest of the group, let's make a date for coffee after the meeting." If the person becomes difficult, just say "Sorry, but I'm going to have to stop you there. I just want to bring us back to the topic". Respect everyone and treat them in a loving manner.

7. **Mention someone's name** – people like hearing their names. It creates a sense of belonging, acknowledgement, and importance. Say for example, "Thank you for sharing that Stephen", instead of just "Thank you for sharing."
8. **Give everybody time to share** - Afterward, if appropriate, make a heartfelt comment, like "thank you for sharing that Stephen", "that's great Sally", "you've given me something to think about John." Be sincere when you encourage, don't flatter.
9. **Don't be the first to answer** – When you ask a question, don't be tempted to be the first one to give an answer, even if it becomes awkwardly silent. Instead try to rephrase the question to draw people into the discussion.
10. **Ask open-ended questions** – You want to encourage participation so try and avoid questions with simple 'yes' or 'no' answers.
11. **Ask follow-up questions** – When people habitually give short answers, try and prompt them to say more with a follow up question.
12. **Keep people to the topic** – if they go off topic, say something like, "I would like to talk to you more about this Mary, let's do it after the meeting or can I meet you for coffee in the week?". If needed, ask a new relevant question to get the discussion going again. At the same time, be sensitive if the Holy Spirit wants to steer the discussion in another direction.
13. **Don't try to be perfect** – People aren't looking for perfect, they are looking for real. Show vulnerability – we all need Jesus.
14. **You don't need to have all the answers** – People will understand if you say, "I don't know. Let me try and find out the answer to that question this week." It may also inspire them that they too could lead a small group.
15. **Every now and then do something fun** – like have a cake, just have a social or meet at an interesting location.
16. **Do things outside group time** (depending on the type of group; perfect for Young Adults or Youth) – When you take the group outside of your meeting time and outside of your usual meeting place, relationships often grow deeper and faster. If it is difficult for people to meet outside of the usual meeting time, consider having a games night or other type of social during the small group time.

## THINGS TO BEAR IN MIND

1. **Confidentiality** – Never gossip. At the same time, you do not want to load a burden of confidentiality on yourself that you are not able to bear. People will probably not share extremely confidential matters in a small group, but as relationships grow someone may want to share something with you personally that needs to be brought to the attention of trusted individuals, other leaders, or professionals. If possible, endeavour to communicate up front that you will keep the matter confidential, but that you cannot be placed under a burden when someone else is in danger or when serious action is needed.
2. **Don't stick together too long** – Plan to go away. A leader should always be looking to raise up another leader to take over the group. Pray and ask God for a potential leader and invest in that person what you know. Think multiplication. When people stick together for too long, they often become exclusive, the group stagnates, and people become stuck in a comfort zone. Healthy things are meant to grow.
3. **Start a relationship** – People in church context often don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. Make relationships a priority. View people in your group as friends and family, not just group member.
4. **Remember the purpose of small groups** – to create biblical community that allows people to engage with one another for the purpose of becoming more like Jesus.
5. **Each person is valuable** – We can learn great things from people who accepted Jesus the day before. Everyone's life experience is different, gifts are different, culture, family set-up and the list goes on. When we realise the value that each member contributes to the group, it will be a lot easier to create space for everyone to share.