

Biblical Role Model

The Bible tells us that the small groups in New Testament times pursued the biblical purposes of fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship. It was true then and it's true now that a healthy group will be focused on balancing those purposes.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47 TNIV)

The small groups that met in homes, as recorded in the book of Acts, were a strategic part of the greater church, just as your small group is a strategic part of your church.

1. **Fellowship:** "They joined in the fellowship . . . and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." That's important in the body of Christ—recognizing that I am a part of God's family and we are going to fellowship together. When you look at the New Testament, this is exactly what Christ did. He gathered a group of twelve guys and hung out with them. They ate together, learned together, and shared in each other's lives. Not only will true fellowship connect you and your members to each other, but it will also connect all of you to Christ.
2. **Discipleship:** The Bible says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." That means they devoted themselves to growing in Christ and maturity. Evidently, they not only listened to what the disciples were teaching in the temple courts (equivalent to our church) on the Sabbath and other days but also gathered in their homes and studied together what they had been taught in the temple courts. Doing a Bible study is just one piece of discipleship. It's not only learning about the Word of God but also bringing its truth into every aspect of our lives. It is about helping each other identify and take our spiritual next step.
3. **Ministry:** They gave "to anyone who had need." These groups became an outlet of support for each other and for other members of the church. Your small group needs to be more than just a meeting that happens on a Tuesday night. Your members need to be engaged in ministry, which is simply meeting the needs of people within your church (as well as within your small group). Ministry is another word for service—serving one another in practical ways. Sometimes the ministry will take place right in your groups as people walk through a crisis together. Or it may be something as simple as giving a group member a ride to the airport or getting together as a group and painting a room in the church. This often leads to members discovering how God has gifted them in a way that is perfectly suited for service in your church.
4. **Evangelism:** That was their mission. Ministry is a way of serving other believers. Mission is serving the world (and unbelievers) at large. "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Your group also should have a mission to the world and a ministry to the church. That world includes your neighborhood, your community, and the rest of the world. It can start as simply praying for your neighbors and could then progress to planning activities designed for building bridges with those who are not followers of Christ. People are attracted to the changes they see taking place in the lives of healthy Christians. Your group can serve as a

magnet for drawing people to Christ. Every small group has the potential to participate in and contribute to personal, local, and global missions.

5. **Worship:** “They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . [They were] praising God.” These early Christians worshiped in their homes. And what was the result? “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.” Worship is not just the music we experience during the weekend service. Worship is about surrendering your life to Christ so you can live more abundantly and become more like Christ in nature. Small groups help members become more transparent as they receive the support they need to flourish in their Christian walk. This increased transparency provides the fertile ground for worship.

Fellowship

First Impressions Create Lasting Impressions If you are starting a new group or inviting a new person into your existing group, be aware that people’s first impression may determine whether they make a second visit to the group. Help new people feel very welcomed. Let them know you are happy they are joining you for the night. Keep it light and informal, but be intentional in making them feel they are entering a safe place, not interrupting a private party. Have group members tell a little bit about themselves, even if your group has been meeting for the last five years and only one person is new. To reduce tension, use a simple icebreaker question such as: What is your favorite television show and what do you like about it? Finding that they have similar tastes in television shows is a simple but effective way to start connecting members to each other or to a new member.

The first impression is usually a lasting one, so you want it to be positive. To make this happen, you can work in three zones:

1. Before the group meets—Connect with those who are coming for the first time. Make sure they have directions, ask if there is anything you can do to accommodate any special needs, but most of all, make sure they know you are excited about them coming.
2. During the group time—Be sure to greet them using their first name. Be mindful that if you are a hugger, not everyone else is; you have to earn the right to give hugs. Make sure they are included in the group conversation. If they don’t participate, ask if there is anything they would like to add. Be yourself so they can be themselves; and smile. And make sure you start and end on time.
3. After the meeting—Let them know you appreciate them. Find out if there is anything they would change or add to make it a great experience. Also, ask them to bring a bag of chips or veggies to the next group meeting—there is nothing like a small responsibility to help them feel valued.

Fellowship—the Foundation for All Other Purposes. Not only is true Christian fellowship the glue that will hold your group together when times get tough, but it also is the necessary foundation for all of the other purposes. Unless people feel safe and connected to each other, discipleship will suffer and they will not feel comfortable taking their spiritual next step. They won't reveal their spiritual gifts and abilities, and they won't be willing to join together to serve. If they don't feel connected, valued, and respected, group members will not invite others into their small group (or possibly even to church). Real worship won't happen if fellowship isn't present. But if they do feel connected, valued, and respected, it will be natural for them to want others to experience the same sort of community.

Discipleship

Discipleship involves all of the biblical purposes. Of the five biblical purposes, discipleship is the most difficult to define because it is holistic in nature and encompasses all of the other purposes. When you are healthy and growing in spiritual maturity:

you have authentic relationships with other Christians (fellowship)

you are learning biblical principles (discipleship)

you are using your gifts and abilities to serve others (ministry)

you are reaching out to others (evangelism)

you are praising God and surrendering your life to him (worship)

So the best way to promote spiritual growth in yourself, in others, and in your group is to work on balancing those five biblical purposes in your life and in your group.

The Power of Encouragement. As the leader of your small group, sometimes the most important thing for you to accomplish is simply encouraging your members. You need to continually look for ways to speak words of affirmation and encouragement into the lives of each member. I love Hebrews 3:13: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." You know what that passage tells me? Encouragement is a powerful tool that has the power to restrain sin. Use it!

A Look, a Word, and a Touch. Pastor Rick taught me that your small group members need your encouragement through "a look, a word, and a touch." Give them your full attention and make eye contact with them when they speak. Speak simple words of encouragement that will breathe into their soul. Provide a simple touch such as a handshake, a hand on the shoulder, or a hug. It's important to believe in them because if you do, they're going to grow. If they feel loved and affirmed, they will be willing to take more risks. As you model this type of behavior, it will soon become normal in the group, and you will find encouragement growing between members.

Constantly Encourage Spiritual Next Steps. Just as our Spiritual Health Assessment is broken into crawl, walk, and run steps, you and your group members need to think of ways to encourage each other in a crawl, walk, run manner. For example, during a group discussion, Jim mentions that his father has been dealing with some medical issues and is feeling discouraged, think of small steps that could lead to encouragement. For instance:

Crawl—Send a “thinking of you” card to his father.

Walk—Give his father a call on the phone.

Run—Go for a visit.

Group members will be more willing to take smaller steps. As they are successful in those smaller steps, they will be more comfortable taking the more difficult steps. So how can you do this with the people in your group? Think through the opportunity and risk as well as the fear and faith.

Enabling group members for discipleship

1. Make sure everyone has a Bible. This may seem like an obvious suggestion, but don't assume that everyone in your group has a Bible. If you have anyone that needs a bible, Lifehouse will gladly supply a bible for that person. We use the HCSB or CSB translation, it is easy to understand and read.
2. Challenge your group to be in the word daily, through the central scriptures in your current study, or going through a book of the bible together. A great example would be challenging everyone to read through the book of John, 1,2,3 John, and the Book of James. Keep yourself and others in the word daily.
3. Encourage everyone to be spending time in prayer daily. Keep a list of current prayer request, assign someone to send them out to the group daily to keep it on their minds and create a habit of prayer.

Ministry

Prioritizing ministry opportunities within your Life Group and getting your group involved in ministry opportunities is an essential for you group. We are called to serve within the church, establishing an attitude of servanthood grows us as believers, bonds us as a group, and attaches us to the greater church family.

1. Find opportunities to serve the needs of your group members.
2. Serve in church organized mission and outreach events as a life group.
3. Encourage group members to serve consistently within a church ministry.

Roles

Group Roles are a great way to introduce new members and existing members into a ministry role on a smaller scale, but still an essential part of the group. As the leader, locate people who are connectors, those members that always seem to remember everyone's name and go out of their way to make others feel comfortable. Locate the administrators in your group, the people who are organized and always prepared. Locate people who love to be hospitable, the person who always brings a great dish or dessert to your group and goes above and beyond with their hospitality. Finding these individuals and giving them a role within the life group is a huge benefit. Roles to fill within your group to help it grow:

Meal Coordinator- Someone to plan meals for the whole life group session and to coordinate who is bringing what is an enormous help! Find someone who is well gifted in administration.

Hospitality coordinator- Going out of your way to make sure people are comfortable and taken care of is an amazing thing and that extends past just meeting time. Having a person who is keeping up with the prayer needs, life needs, and times of crisis of the other members of the group is essential to the health of the group. You need someone that can coordinate meals if a member of your family is sick, someone that can send information to the group about visiting someone in the hospital. Life happens, and when it does your life group is the first line of defense.

Outreach coordinator- Growing your group is really important to the long-term health of a life group, but also our church. We want people to be involved in life groups. But, often people need a connection before they make that step to attending a life group. Have a person that invites people and is available on Sundays to make connections with visitors and get them involved. What do you do when someone new comes to your group?

Keeping a group on track

How Do I Navigate a Lesson?

The lesson is a tool to prompt discussion and learning; adapt it to the needs of your group. Remember, you don't have to answer all the questions. Most curriculums have more questions than you can answer. So a few days before the group meeting, read them over to decide which questions your group needs to discuss. Spending quality time on a few questions is better than skimming through all the questions. The lesson should be used to help spark the thought-provoking side of spiritual formation in each member.

Discussion

Having good discussion is the key for any group to thrive and move to the next level. To start any discussion, people have to feel safe talking. Most curriculums will start with an icebreaker. This may seem trivial, and you may want to skip it for the sake of time, but icebreakers are critical to getting conversation going. They will give you the opportunity to learn new things about the people you are with that the study wouldn't necessarily bring up.

Most study questions are designed to create open-ended answers beginning with "What" and "How" questions to get people to share. Try to involve as many people as possible because when people discuss and ask further questions, you learn where they are in their spiritual development and life in

general. Know what you want to accomplish in the study so you can gauge how much discussion is on target and how much is more like rabbit trails. Any discussion is a balance between Holy Spirit moments and people just rambling. Be sensitive to the difference between God doing something you may not have planned and the group going off course. Before the group meeting starts, know the one thing you want to accomplish so you can feel comfortable.

Listening Well

How do you listen well? It starts by looking at the person talking. Don't stare him or her down eyeball to eyeball, but look at the zone between the eyebrows to the tip of the nose. And pay attention! Listen with your eyes. Ears are important, but when your eyes are engaged, you stay focused. If your study guide or cell phone tends to be a distraction, set it aside. Then ask follow-up questions to be sure you understand the person's perspective.

Making Prayer Work

My real friends don't have to ask what to pray for because they know what's going on in my life. That's an awesome place to be! As community deepens in your group, you will start to recognize prayer needs. Until that happens, however, start with these guidelines:

- Write down the requests. You may use a journal, or maybe you have a private group on your social media. The bottom line is to use whatever you need to keep track of your group members' requests.
- Give an appropriate amount of time to actually pray for the requests.
- Encourage a group atmosphere in which stopping immediately and praying for a need isn't awkward.
- Coach your members to be as specific as possible.
- Look for a variety of ways to incorporate prayer into your group time. Sometimes break up by gender to pray, other times break into groups of two or three, or sometimes ask one person to close in prayer. Be creative and ask others to give suggestions.

Talkative People

The talkative person seldom realizes he or she is talking too much. The individual has a comment for every question and every situation. If you are not careful, that person will dominate the group and give others little time to speak. If Jerry is the talkative one, avoid making eye contact with him when you ask the group questions. Be intentional in asking others to speak. If necessary, speak to him privately, outside of group time. Do so gently, however. Tell him you appreciate his contributions, and ask him to help you get others to contribute in the same way. You can also ask Jerry to sit next to you so that if he is talking too much, you can set up a signal (like a nudge) to help him be more aware of his tendency.

Confusing or Concerning Theological Questions or Statements

There is always the possibility with having new people being involved that are going to contribute to your group with statements outside of the bounds of scripture. Often, this is not out of malice or spite, but out of confusing and just wanting to contribute, as a leader, it is always appropriate to gently

moving the conversation forward and hopefully that would be the end of it. However, you will likely encounter someone who has deeply rooted beliefs that do not align with scripture. If this is an ongoing issue, I would strongly encourage you to contact one of the staff members or elders of Lifehouse, inform them of the situation, and they can guide you from there. Do not feel that you are an island, our Life Groups are a part of our church and if you are dealing with conflict, reach out for pastoral support.