

# Confessions of a Small Group Leader

Lessons learned the hard way.

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My first experience in small-group ministry is now over—sooner than I expected. But I still believe in the concept. Even though I made so many mistakes, I intend to go out and try again. In fact, I'm already involved in a second small group, and I've taken steps to safeguard against the problems I'm about to describe.

The first group started after my Sunday school class complained that forty-five minutes wasn't enough time to do the text justice. I suggested we meet on some weeknight in addition to Sunday morning.

One couple volunteered their home, and before long, their living room was filled with young adults we never could have coaxed out of bed for Sunday school. More important, the teaching enjoyed an efficiency over tortilla chips and cola that somehow had hit snags coming over a pulpit or lectern. The church had given me a license to preach, but the small group gave me license to minister.

We made some serious blunders, however. What were they? Here are several.

## Prone to Clone

Having never been a guru before, I had no idea how easy it is to abuse your position of prominence and clone others in your image.

Our group granted me the positions of Discussion Leader, Teacher, Information Clearinghouse, and Interpreter of Holy Writ—and I too readily accepted.

At first I praised the Lord for a group so responsive to my discipling, but I started hearing things that scared me. People began quoting me the way I quoted C. S. Lewis and C. H. Spurgeon. I heard not only my words, illustrations, anecdotes, mottoes, and doctrinal positions being repeated, but also my attitudes and prejudices. It wasn't so bad that they adopted my soteriology and even my eschatology, but they were assuming my personality! I wondered if Jim Jones started out this way.

What precautions should I have taken?

I should have insisted that others in the group lead the studies with gradually increasing frequency. I should have asked fewer questions with "right" answers. I should have gradually extricated myself and forced them to go on without me as their role model.

## Resisting My Natural Bend

Allowing myself to become the long-term leader played against my natural strengths. I'm a starter, not a sustainer.

Our original plan was for me to start the group, leave it in the hands of whatever leadership God raised up, and move on to launch another group. But I was swayed from my better judgment.

Yes, we started a spin-off group for people who couldn't meet on Tuesdays, but it never really took off. Instead of leading that group myself, I delegated the missionary task to two young men I'd been meeting with one-on-one. They were good students, willing "missionaries," but the fact remains that I was the more gifted spark plug. The main group would have done fine under their leadership; the second group would have done better under mine.

Leading a Bible study over the long haul is like pastoring—you become a marriage counselor, demonologist, and psychotherapist. My living room became a refuge for the romantically disturbed. Since my gifts are more prophetic than pastoral, I was playing a role God hadn't intended me to play. I wound up tired, frustrated, impatient.

This wouldn't have happened if I'd stuck to my plan of starting but letting others sustain.

### **People We Didn't Expect**

When word gets out that something significant is going on in so-and-so's living room, you'll attract two kinds of people who can spell trouble: (1) those with emotional or psychological problems who see your group as a crisis intervention center, and (2) offbeat theological nomads looking for a group to take over.

Our group didn't do so well with those looking for psychoanalysis. I read Gary Collins, Jay Adams, and every other counseling expert I could find, but I ended up referring the troubled souls to local ministers who had doctorates in counseling. The troubled souls merely drifted through in their search for a couch.

We did better with the traveling heretics. If you measure success by the ability to drown dissonant voices, we were most impressive.

One night several cultists dropped in and wanted to challenge me on two or three basics of orthodoxy. For once I was glad I'd cloned myself among the members of the group. I just sat back and listened as two of the guys I'd been meeting for breakfast over asystematic theology text soundly out-debated the outsiders. The nonnegotiables of orthodoxy were well defended without me opening my mouth. If I hadn't done much else right, at least I'd developed a couple of better-than-average apologists for the faith.

### **An Informal Institution**

The nonchurchy, spontaneous atmosphere of our group was its most basic appeal. It was my fault we lost it. In an effort to develop cohesion and identity, we developed too many trappings of an institution.

One of my early mistakes was bringing in outside speakers once a month. I thought it would give us access to the best possible teaching. But attendance dropped on those nights, the group voting

their disapproval by their absence. Those who came were hesitant to open up with questions or comments.

Another mistake was trying to give the group a name. Being identified with a catchy name and logo would draw us closer, I thought, but the group saw the innovation as churchiness. They continued to call our group simply "the Bible study."

The whole group was at fault for yet another feature: we behaved like jealous lovers when one of our number left for another activity or ministry. The heart of institutionalism is demanding self-interested loyalty, which should never characterize Christians, whose only justifiable loyalty is their allegiance to Christ. We would never say so, but we began feeling ours was the best, if not the only, game in town. We forgot our purposes of discipleship, evangelism, and Bible knowledge. We just wanted to preserve our group.

We even had a liturgy of sorts. We ate junk food at a certain time, prayed at a certain time, shared, and of course, I taught—all in proper order. We lost our initial spontaneity and became so rigid that visitors felt like outsiders and didn't come back. We no longer offered the cozy supplement to the church; we had become our own church.

### **The End of Our Beginning**

I once heard J. Vernon McGee say something to the effect that most organizations get started because there's a real need that ought to be met, but many groups perpetuate themselves long after the goals have been met. They outlive their usefulness.

From the beginning I viewed the Bible study as a temporary work that would meet some needs, fill a gap, and then pass away when no longer needed. I often thought of Amos the prophet, who rose from obscurity to speak the words God gave him and then, his mission completed, had enough sense to shut up and go back to his herds. I vowed I would be like Amos and disband the small group when my prophetic mission was accomplished.

Eventually came the day when I felt the Bible study had outlived its purpose. Most of the people were in churches that, for the most part, met their needs, and the few who hadn't yet joined organized congregations were spiritually strong enough to survive without the weekly spoon feeding. Of course, there were a few who relied on the group heavily—too heavily, I thought. I suspected they would grow more if made to fend for themselves.

The first time I suggested we disband, the group protested. I gave it more time but urged them to pray for God's direction and to examine their motives for seeing the group continue.

The next time I suggested dissolution, there were nods of agreement. We met one more time, and then called it quits.

## **Two Words of Warning**

Ministry in a small group requires a solid ecclesiology. Without it, two pitfalls become real dangers for small-group leaders.

First, people can make you feel you have to start a church, if not formally, at least informally, complete with polity, clergy, and other trappings. The danger is losing sight of the original purpose; the group can begin to exist for its own sake.

Remember Amos. God may be raising up a neighborhood Bible study or a young-adult sharing group just for a certain time. Meet as long as you see fruit. Quit when the purposes have been fulfilled.

A second pitfall is thinking that because you're not a church, you can get by with less commitment and preparation. The difference between an organized church and a home Bible study is often no more than people sitting in pews or on sofas. The body of Christ is anatomically identical whether in a living room or a cathedral. It requires our best effort.

Don't confuse the wineskins with the wine. Whether the wineskins are organized churches with pews and payrolls or home Bible studies with coffee and questions, the wine is the same.

So small groups are sometimes fraught with dangers—largely in the temptation to make them something they're not or in not respecting them for all they are. But don't allow the perils to dissuade you.

Despite my less-than-perfect experience, I still believe the small group is the best vehicle available for the full employment of all the spiritual gifts and blessings in the church.

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