

# Orientation Guide: Small-Group Apprentice



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## How to Use This Resource

*Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.*

By Sam O'Neal

It's sometimes strange for people in a modern, Western society to realize that apprenticeship has been the primary method of job training throughout human history. And I'm not just talking about "on the job" training for small groups. Apprenticeship was the only way to prepare for any job—period.

That's because apprenticeship works. Having the opportunity to "learn as you go" gives apprentices a decided advantage when it comes time for them to step out on their own. And that's what many churches and group leaders are re-discovering today when it comes to small groups.

If you are thinking about serving as a small-group apprentice, or if you've already signed up, get ready for a wild ride!

### Prepare for Your Role

The four articles in this section are valuable resources for potential apprentices, to start. The "Job Description" and "What Leaders Do; What Apprentices Do" chart can both make sure that potential apprentices know what they are getting into. And "Help—I'm an Apprentice!" asks some tough questions about motivation and preparedness. In short, these resources will help new and potential apprentices understand what they are committing to before they take the full plunge into small-group leadership.

And "An Interview with Experienced Small-Group Apprentices" contains a lot of helpful insights from a husband and wife who went through the process and came out very encouraged.

### Perform Your Role

Once you do take that plunge, this section of the training packet will provide you with very practical help and ideas for making a lasting impact with your group. I think "A Small-Group Leader's Most Important Job" is a must read for apprentices and group leaders alike. And the remaining articles each touch on a different set of skills and practices that apprentices will need to grapple with in order to be most effective—from hospitality to writing Bible-study questions to engaging with group members in conflict.

—SAM O'NEAL; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International

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## Job Description: Small-Group Apprentice

*Here are the basic ministry areas and expectations of a small-group apprentice.*

By Sam O'Neal

### Personal Ministry

**Objective:** To maintain a strong personal walk with the Lord by continuing in the spiritual disciplines that are necessary for spiritual fitness and growth in the grace and knowledge of God.

#### Goals:

1. Spend time in the Bible each day, pursuing personal growth and maturity.
2. Have a consistent prayer life that focuses on praise, thanksgiving, personal needs, the needs of believers, and the needs of the lost.
3. Spend time in spiritual fellowship with others for the purposes of mutual love, encouragement, and growth.
4. Be involved in fulfilling the Great Commission by reaching out to the lost, both in word and deed.

### Small-Group Ministry

**Objective:** To assist the Small-Group Leader in all areas of group life, as appropriate. The Apprentice serves a unique role as a bridge between Group Members and the Group Leader, and the Apprentice's long-term goal should be to gain ministry experience in order to one day serve as a Small-Group Leader.

#### Requirements:

1. Pray daily for the members of your small group.
2. Cultivate a teachable spirit and be open to both feedback and instruction from the Group Leader.
3. Observe the Group Leader in different ministry situations.
4. Coordinate the different aspects of group life as needed and helpful to the Group Leader. Such tasks could include managing a sign-up sheet for snacks, recording and distributing prayer requests, hosting the group meeting in your home, and so on.
5. Under the supervision of the Group Leader, begin leading different parts of the group meeting. This could include leading the group prayer time, discussion, fellowship, worship, service, and so on.
6. Under the supervision of the Group Leader, contact and support Group Members outside of the weekly meeting.
7. Attend all small-group meetings and events.
8. Attend church-sponsored training sessions as required.

I have read and understand the Ministry Qualifications and Responsibilities of a Group Leader Apprentice.

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Name of Apprentice]

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Date]

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Name of Group Leader]

\_\_\_\_\_  
[Date]

— SAM O'NEAL; copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International



## An Interview with Experienced Small-Group Apprentices

*Learn about the process, challenges, and blessings of signing up to lead.*

Interview conducted by Rachel Gilmore

**Note:** While apprentice programs vary from church to church, they typically involve a potential group leader participating in the life of a small group and “learning on the job.” This is usually paired with some kind of leader training. Interviewees Ben and Betsy Joseph participated in a “Turbo Group” training program where both the class itself, as well as the actual group, provide hands on leadership opportunities that are closely monitored and nurtured by a mentor or other seasoned small-group coach).

Ben and Betsy are members of Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, where author and speaker Dr. John Maxwell is the Teaching Pastor. In 2009 they entered the apprentice program and started their own group. Here they share their thoughts on taking the plunge into small group leadership.

### **SmallGroups.com: What did your apprentice training look like?**

**Ben:** Before we even went into Turbo Training [a leadership development group], we were in a small group. We never thought about leading one, but we were really looking for a group of late 20’s to early 30’s newlyweds with no kids. There was nothing like that at our church, so the church leaders asked us to consider starting one. The Turbo Training class at Christ Fellowship meets for three weeks and is offered several times a year. It really walks you through every situation you might encounter as a small-group leader. It covers the Do’s and Don’ts, how to handle each personality you will encounter as a leader, and the list of things to do before the first meeting.

**Betsy:** That’s right. But training is ongoing. We received binders filled with all kinds of resource material that we can use with our own groups. The handouts explain everything, from dealing with difficult people to choosing studies.

**Ben:** The best part about our training was that community leaders [i.e. mature small group leaders] were conducting the classes. They shared their personal experiences of what worked, what didn’t. They had years and years of hands-on leadership to draw from. We loved their stories, and we could ask them any questions.

### **What made you take the leap of faith and join the training?**

**Betsy:** Well, aside from looking for a group that met our own needs, our church is very large and has four locations. The church tries to get as many people as possible connected through small groups because otherwise people get lost in a church that size.

**Ben:** But the reason we went looking was because we have no family here. We had a difficult time connecting with people who shared the same values. That was the most exciting thing about becoming a leader and starting a group—connecting and building relationships with people like that. And my job everyday is leading teens, so I was familiar with small-group formats.

**Betsy:** I grew up in the church and taught Sunday school to young children for a long time. Ben and I were always part of a youth ministry growing up, too. Leading a group just seemed like a good fit. For us, becoming apprentices means that we are taking the lead in creating an environment where biblical community can grow.

### **What challenges does an apprentice small-group leader face?**

**Ben:** At our church, each small-group leader puts a description of his or her particular Life Group on the church web site. Then people can search Life Groups according to their needs. So especially when you first start a group, you worry about, “What if nobody signs up?”

The second challenge is probably all the different personalities you might get. How do you respect different backgrounds and opinions and still have meaningful discussions? There's also the drive to keep going, the commitment level. You have to keep in mind the transient nature of group members. A person might come and join one week and quit the next. Or, if you start with 15 at the first meeting, 5 people may leave over the next few months. Don't take it personally. Just focus on the people who are there.

**Betsy:** In our situation, there are really a lot of issues related to cultural backgrounds with strong (culturally-based) opinions, too. As leaders, what we've learned is to try to keep the discussion as biblically-based as possible. That keeps you on the right path. Just bring everything back to the Bible and what it says.

### ***In what way does the apprentice program help you grow as a leader?***

**Ben:** The apprentice program is really setting people up for success, not setting them up for failure. Once you become a leader, you also get assigned a mentor who is constantly checking on you and your group and seeing how things are going.

**Betsy:** Our community leaders had an open door policy with us. We were able to email them as often as we wanted to. They also emailed us once a week and checked in with us to see how we are doing and gave us advice on how to keep our group going strong. In our opinion, having a community mentor is very important because they give you confidence and you feel like there is always some one there to help you. In a small-group setting sometimes you will come across ups and downs, and it's good to have a leader where you can go to for advice and support.

### ***What blessings have you received through becoming apprentice leaders?***

**Betsy:** We found that we made some great friends through the training classes. You go every week and are surrounded by God-minded people who share your core values. We really felt like we could talk about our personal struggles and our life testimony with people who understand. I think the training class helps build the foundation for lifelong friendships because of that. People pray for each other. They begin to do activities together outside the class even after they go off and lead their own small groups. It's wonderful!

**Ben:** We also realized how important the small group is to the larger church and how important the small-group leader is to both the group and the larger church. You're truly functioning as a branch of the church, and you realize what a big responsibility you have.

### ***What other advice do you have for new apprentices?***

**Ben:** Make it easy on yourself! Especially for the new small-group leader, start out with a study that has a DVD component to it. It really eases you into the role. As you grow in the leadership role, you can take on the tougher assignments of doing the background research and writing your own study to meet the needs of your group. But don't start there. That's a lot to take on at first.

**Betsy:** Our church bookstore carries all of John Maxwell's (leadership training) resources because he's our Teaching Pastor. We also use a lot of Andy Stanley's books and DVDs. Having that kind of material available is a huge help as an apprentice.

**Ben:** As a safety issue, for first time leaders, our church advises having your small group meet at church. At Christ Fellowship, we are blessed, and we have the space to do that. You never know who's going to come to your small group when you start, so it's just a good idea to meet at church for a while if you can. Also, don't worry about size. We know some groups that are 30-40 strong. Other groups are 5 to 6 people. Keep it manageable for you and your setting.

### ***What's one idea that really made an impact on you during your apprentice training?***

**Ben:** The one thing that has stuck with us now is that when you're starting a group, you have to make sure that you spend quite a bit of time meditating, praying, and studying the Word of God. In the end you're representing Jesus Christ. You just never know who God is going to bring into your group. You might get a non-believer. You want to have your Bible in hand and be prepared for that one chance to share God's Word because you might only get one chance. You've got to be ready.

— RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats](#) (Judson Press, 2009). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## Help—I'm an Apprentice!

*Here are some key thought points as you begin your new role.*

By Rick Lowry

Small-group “leaders in training” are the future of any local church. Saying yes to leadership makes it possible for many church members to be properly shepherded and disciplined. And the success of any small-group program depends on the ability of its current leaders to reproduce themselves.

What is an apprentice leader? It is the person or people in a small group that are intentionally developing their leadership skills in preparation for leading a future group. What follows are some attitudes and actions that will be beneficial to anyone interested in taking on the important role of apprentice leader.

### Am I Ready to Be an Apprentice?

Before diving in as an apprentice leader in your small group, you need to take a moment and honestly assess whether you're the right person for the job. The following points will help you do that using the acronym F.A.I.T.H. (faithfulness, availability, initiative, teachability, and honesty).

- *Faithfulness.* Am I faithful to Christ? For anyone aspiring to become an apprentice leader—and eventually a group leader—the first and most important challenge is maintaining a daily walk with Christ. Beyond that, am I faithful in my service to the church? Am I faithful to the vision of my local church? Am I the sort of person that the leaders of my church look at and say, “There’s a faithful member of our church”? If the people closest to me were asked about my character, trustworthiness, or way of relating to others, how would they respond? As I say yes to become a leader-in-training, am I prepared to make a long-term commitment?
- *Availability.* Some people would be great small-group leaders, but their schedules are already full. I may have to challenge myself about my priorities and ask, “What activities would I be willing to give up in order to accomplish a life-changing ministry like small-group leadership?”
- *Initiative.* Am I a self-starter? Can I get things done? Am I excited about this ministry and prepared to be a part of it? Can I continue with a group and lead it long-term?
- *Teachability.* Am I willing to learn? Am I humble? Do I dominate discussions and act like I know it all? Do I have to be right? Am I a life-long learner? If I’ve had a small-group leadership experience in the past that went sour, what can I learn from that?
- *Honesty.* Am I authentic? Small-group members can tell quickly if I’m pretending to be someone I’m not.

After evaluating your qualifications for becoming an apprentice, take a few moments to evaluate your motivation. The following questions can help:

- Do I want to lead a group because I need a group? Some people have such a need to be noticed or be in charge that it marks their leadership and destroys the life of a group.
- Do I want to be a teacher instead of a facilitator? In other words, do I want to be the source of vital information, and to pass that information on to my group through lecture and control? The best group leaders understand how to facilitate a discussion where everyone learns together.
- Do I have too strong of a need to counsel others? Neither apprentices nor group leaders should play the role of a professional counselor.
- Do I love control? Do I tend to be overly structured, critical, and/or demanding of people in the group? Do I sometimes coerce others instead of collaborating?

## The Priorities of an Apprentice

Once you begin serving as a small-group apprentice, you will have the most impact if you hold to the following priorities:

- *Love.* In order to lead spiritually, I need to be driven by a love for God, people, truth, and the church.
- *Prayer.* An effective small-group leader places a high value on prayer. So should an apprentice. Daily prayer for yourself and for your group members is an easy way to make sure your small group operates in the Spirit, not in the flesh.
- *Observation.* One of the central responsibilities of an apprentice is to observe what the group leader does. That's a given. However, the group leader should also be observing the apprentice as he or she begins taking on different tasks of leadership—and the apprentice should not feel threatened by this. A wise group leader can offer encouragement and advice that will help a co-leader grow more quickly and easily into leading a group of their own.
- *Relationships.* An apprentice must work to build a relationship with the group leader, since a good rapport is important to the development process. Time spent together outside the meeting is important. A leader wants to see the intentions, heart, and character of the co-leader. The ideal relationship is a friendship, in addition to the mentoring role.

## Overcoming Barriers

Satan doesn't want the church to develop spiritual leadership, and so small-group leaders and apprentices should expect obstacles. Here are some of the barriers that can distract us from saying yes to this important task.

- *Time and energy.* In order to lead, most people have to decide that they will let go of another important (but not eternal) activity in their schedule.
- *Fear of inadequacy.* On the one hand, such fear is positive—none of us is adequate. Fortunately, we serve a God who can work through us to accomplish his work.
- *Lack of interest in splitting the current group.* A group that has had a great experience of Christian community almost never wants to break up the party. But group members can be challenged to make it possible for others to have the same rich experience by stepping out and starting a new group.
- *Priorities.* Most any Christian can find something in their weekly schedule that is less important than small-group leadership—and let it go.
- *Lack of spiritual maturity.* A small-group leader is not so much a ruling authority as a point guard on a team. Every potential leader should be deepening their relationship to Christ, but in another sense, a small group of Christians all bring something to the group that can help the others grow. The leader learns along with everyone else in the group.

It's easy for potential small-group leaders to feel like Moses: "Don't send me, Lord!" But God met each of Moses' objections by promising his presence, power, and provision. And he can meet yours, as well.

— RICK LOWRY is Small-Groups Pastor at Crossroads Christian Church in Newburgh, IN. Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.

## Discuss:

1. Am I ready to be a small-group apprentice? And am I prepared to one day serve as a small-group leader?
2. What barriers or challenges am I most nervous about?
3. What aspects of serving as an apprentice are most exciting to me?



## What Leaders Do; What Apprentices Do

*Use this helpful chart to determine which person does what.*

By Pat J. Sikora

Any time I lead a small group or teach a class, I want to have a co-leader or apprentice by my side. To me, that's just good leadership. I believe that one of the marks of an excellent leader is that he or she is always training others. I also want to have my replacement ready and equipped, just in case God calls me to something else—and He has surprised more than once by moving me on before I thought it was time. In addition, an apprentice can significantly reduce my workload and increase my effectiveness as a group leader.

Some people develop and work with apprentices well; others don't seem to know how to use this valuable resource. Below is a matrix I use when inviting a co-leader or apprentice to serve with me. The specifics may vary depending on your situation, and on the gifts and talents of the person you are working with.

When possible, I look for someone who can balance and complement my own unique mix of gifts, skills, preferences, and available time. As I'm getting ready to lead a new small group or work with a new co-leader, I develop a matrix like the one below so that we're both on the same page. Feel free to modify this one to suit your needs:

<b>TASK</b>	<b>LEADER</b>	<b>CO-LEADER OR APPRENTICE</b>
<b>PRAYER</b>	Prays regularly for the group and for each person in the group.	Prays regularly for the group and for each person in the group.
		Leads the sharing and prayer portion of a group meeting. Maintains the master prayer log and regularly checks for praises or follow-up needs.
<b>STUDY GUIDE SELECTION</b>	Defines and articulates the mission of the group.	May assist in defining and articulating the mission of the group
	Decides on which study guide the group will use.	May advise and assist with study guide selection and procurement.
<b>WORSHIP</b>	Determines the type or content of worship, and the time allocated for each meeting.	Leads or arranges for worship at each meeting.
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	Prepares for and facilitates the group discussion.	Prepares for and helps facilitate discussion. Leads in the absence of the leader, or as agreed upon with the leader.
	Asks most of the questions in the discussion. Sets the primary direction or goal of the discussion.	Stays alert to body language and comments of members that might indicate confusion or disagreement, and then intercepts these as appropriate. Rephrases or clarifies questions as needed. Asks follow-up questions to pursue a point or meet a specific need.
	Models enthusiasm, transparency, accountability, and the desire for growth.	Models enthusiasm, transparency, accountability, and the desire for growth.
	Paces discussion, sharing, and prayer to allow adequate time for each.	Monitors time and warns leader if any portion is exceeding the allowed time.
	Keeps discussion on track.	Helps keep discussion on track by rephrasing or by pointing out a digression.
	Holds members accountable for agreed upon growth, as appropriate.	Assists in holding members accountable for agreed upon growth, as appropriate.
<b>MEMBER CARE</b>	Follows up on some members each week, particularly those who are struggling.	Follows up on all absentees each week, as well as members known to be struggling or in need.
		May serve as host/hostess for meetings. Or makes sure that host/hostess understands roles and responsibilities.

<b>TASK</b>	<b>LEADER</b>	<b>CO-LEADER OR APPRENTICE</b>
<b>SOCIALS AND FELLOWSHIP</b>	May assume responsibility for socials or fellowship.	May assume responsibility for socials or fellowship.
		Manages refreshment assignment list, including reminders as necessary.
<b>GROUP MANAGEMENT &amp; DISCIPLINE</b>	Makes the hard decisions regarding the group and its members.	Advises in the hard decisions regarding the group and its members.
	Models the fruit of the spirit to members.	Models the fruit of the spirit to members.

— PAT J. SIKORA is founder of [Mighty Oak Ministries](#) and author of [Why Didn't You Warn Me? How to Deal with Challenging Group Members](#). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## A Small-Group Leader's Most Important Job

*You can benefit from the surprising results of extensive research on small groups.*

By Jim Egli

A religious expert wanting to cut through the confusion of 613 Old Testament statutes came to Jesus and asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus gave his famous reply, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:28–32).

Like the scribe who came to Jesus, I was a confused small-groups expert just a few years back. I kept hearing advice from a plethora of small-group authors and speakers, each promoting different methods and models. All of them were confident and persuasive, but their contradictory theories couldn’t all be right. Someone needed to do cut through the confusion by doing serious, scientific research on what really creates healthy, growing small groups. We needed to look past the models to discover the key underlying principles.

I wanted to get to the bottom of things. I wanted an answer to the question, “What’s the most important part of leading a small group?” I completed a Ph.D. degree and did extensive statistical research involving over 3,000 small-group leaders in more than 200 churches to probe that question, and the answer I found was surprisingly simple.

The most important dimension of leading a group is your prayer life—your connection to God as a leader.

### What You Do in Secret

Along with my research partner—Dwight Marable, director of Missions International—I probed hundreds of items, asking questions about group dynamics, leadership behaviors, and group meetings. But the highest correlations to small-group health and growth were to the unseen dimensions of a group leader’s relationship with God. Out of the hundreds of questions we asked, the leaders’ answers to the following questions yielded the most pivotal results:

- How consistently do you take time for prayer and Bible reading?
- Are you praying daily for your non-Christian friends to come to know Jesus?
- How many days in the past week did you pray for your small-group members?
- Do you pray for your group meetings in the days leading up to it?
- How much time on average do you spend in daily prayer and Bible reading?

The leaders whose answers revealed a strong relationship with God had groups that were healthier and faster growing. These groups experienced a deeper level of care between members, had a clearer sense of mission beyond their group, and produced more leaders and new groups.

However, the research revealed that the biggest difference a strong prayer life makes comes in the evangelistic effectiveness of a small group. One question that we asked group leaders was how many people had come to Christ through the influence of their group or group members in the past nine months. The contrast between leaders with a strong prayer life and a weak prayer life was startling.

Eighty-three percent of leaders with a strong prayer life reported that at least one person had come to Jesus through the influence of their group, whereas only 19 percent of leaders with a weak prayer life could say the same. It didn't surprise us that leaders with a growing relationship with God had groups that were bringing more people to Christ, but it was shocking how much of a difference it makes. Leaders with a strong prayer life have groups that, on average, have more than four times the evangelistic impact as groups led by leaders with a weak prayer life.

### How Do You Prepare for Your Small-Group Meetings?

The biggest surprise in our research concerned how small-group leaders prepare for their group meetings. Two questions that we asked leaders were: *How much time do you spend on average preparing the lesson for your small-group meeting?* and *How much time do you spend on average praying for your small-group meeting?*

Much to our surprise, the research revealed absolutely zero correlation between time spent preparing the lesson and whether the group was growing in any way. In other words, when you statistically compare hundreds of leaders spending two hours preparing their lessons with hundreds of leaders spending five minutes preparing their lesson, there is no difference at all between those two groups in whether their groups are bringing more people to Christ, adding new members, or producing more leaders.

But there are very high correlations when it comes to whether the group leaders are praying for their meetings.

Most leaders reported spending significantly more time preparing their lesson than they did praying for their meeting. They didn't realize that the time spent preparing their lesson or questions makes little difference, while time spent praying for their members and their meeting makes a big difference. Apparently things depend more on God than on you. Or, put another way, it's more important to prepare your heart than it is to prepare your notes.

How about you? Do you spend more time lining up your lesson, or do you take more time praying for others and inviting God to work in your meeting?

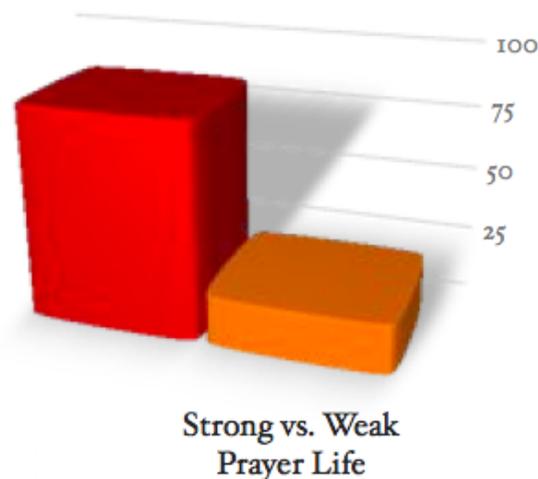
I'd like to challenge you to try an experiment for the next three meetings. Take more time praying for your members and asking God to work in your meeting than you take preparing your lesson or discussion. I think you'll see a noticeable difference in how your meetings go.

This discovery changed a lot of things for me. I spend significantly more time praying as a small-group leader now and less time going over the group lesson ahead of time. What we learned also changed how our church does small-group leader training. We spend less time training people how to prepare for and lead a discussion and more time teaching people how to grow in their relationship with the Lord.

### Why Is Prayer So Important?

Why does the prayer life of the leader make such a difference in the health and growth of a small group? The research doesn't tell us why, it only tells us that a very strong correlation exists. But I don't think it's hard to figure out.

Percent that saw Persons  
Brought to Christ in Past 9 Months:  
**83% vs. 19%**



Jesus said in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing” (NLT). When we are connected to Jesus, his life is flowing through us. The leader who is taking time with Jesus has a secret power source. He or she is receiving direction. Christ’s grace, peace, compassion, and power are flowing more freely to and through their group. Perhaps the group members are also connecting to Jesus more strongly and consistently themselves.

Basically, our research statistically proved John 15:5! If you want to see Jesus’ life flowing in your small group, stay connected to him!

### **Is That All?**

Our research revealed four critical dimensions to small-group life and leadership. We have labeled them with four action verbs: Pray (your prayer life), Reach (reaching out to those that need Jesus), Care (showing practical love to one another), and Empower (giving away ministry and leadership to others). Basically, it comes down to loving God and loving others.

What’s the most important part of leading a small group? Our research revealed it’s not about your abilities, your personality traits, or getting extensive training. It all comes down to relationships with God and others. Or, as Jesus once said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” And, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

— JIM EGLI is a small-group leader and the Lead Small-Group Pastor at the Vineyard Church in Urbana, IL. For more information on the research that Jim Egli and Dwight Marable have done related to small-group growth, visit [www.smallgroupsbigimpact.com](http://www.smallgroupsbigimpact.com). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## Your Open Home

*The main principles and challenges of small-group hospitality.*

By Linda McCullough-Moore

Group leaders and apprentices need to remember that much of what is taught and learned in a group comes through our actions and behaviors as much as our words. We serve a God that walked on this Earth and dwells in our hearts. He is the Word. And we are his witnesses in word and deed.

The issue of hospitality is particularly important in this regard and needs to be understood and practiced in its broadest understanding. In all of its forms, hospitality has one major characteristic: it welcomes and takes in the person to whom it is offered. It does not put emphasis upon the graciousness of the host, or the lavishness of food or drink or entertainment. Rather, it makes the recipient feel valued and cared for.

Somehow we have taken the word *hospitality* as a code word for tea and cookies. But when we look at how hospitality is practiced in the Bible, it is most often a case of one person meeting the needs of another. When Abraham “entertains angels unaware,” he offers them rest from their journey and a meal to sustain them. He offers what they need.

### Central Principles

Here are a few central precepts on hospitality that are useful for our small groups, both in and out of our regular meeting times:

- **Host social gatherings.** In most cases, small groups will be most effective and successful to the extent that members bring their whole selves to the enterprise—that is, to the extent that people feel welcomed and comfortable to be truly themselves. This goal is enhanced when members are occasionally given the opportunity to get together as a group outside the regular meeting time.

Thank God for potlucks. Group leaders do not always have the financial resources to provide large meals for groups of people. But they can offer welcome glasses of lemonade or iced tea, or hot beverages in season. Often the greatest act of hospitality is to welcome other people to your home. This offering communicates welcome and a readiness to give that far more precious gift of time and attention.

- **Come as you are to us as we are.** On the most practical level, we have somehow gotten the idea that the concept of hospitality involves a vacuum cleaner and a good supply of cleaning solvents. But the truth is almost paradoxical here. If everything is spotless and tidy every time someone comes to your home, it can feel daunting to visitors. They can feel like their home would never measure up were the visit returned. In addition, when we visit a home where everything is perfect, it makes us feel like “company.”

But being invited to the home of a friend for a simple meal with the family, with no special food or ceremony, can make visitors feel valued. It can make them feel included, taken in—that the hosting family is comfortable and welcoming of him. A significant aspect of hospitality is the extent to which the visitor is made to feel a part of things, rather than a visiting outsider.

- **Work as fun.** One way a small group can grow closer is to ask for help and to enjoy the fun of working together. One leader I know invited his small group to come to his new home and help him build a stone wall in the front. The day was a true bonding experience and moved group members closer.
- **Attitude is hospitality.** The extending of hospitality is not confined to opening your home. Phone conversations and emails can be given in the same spirit and with much the same effect—particularly to members of the group who may be more reserved.

## The Challenges of Hospitality

Not only is practicing hospitality more than tea and cookies, there may be a few monkey wrenches thrown in the mix, as well. Here are some challenges you may face, and how to deal with them:

- **A need for boundaries.** One of the chief functions of a group leader is setting boundaries—such things as time, place, membership, agenda, and the basic ways of being together as a group. In certain aspects, these boundaries extend outside the group as well. In order to be a good group leader, an individual needs to have times of quiet and refreshing and also time to accomplish all the necessary jobs and chores of family and personal life. Sometimes group members take to dropping by unannounced or overstaying when they visit. But group leaders do no favors if they allow themselves or their homes to be used without consideration.
- **A need for discernment.** This calls for very careful discernment. There are people who will abuse hospitality and our availability, and we need to be prayerful in all encounters, asking God to show us those times when we must respond. People do live lives of quiet desperation, sometimes noisy desperation, and we need to tune in when human contact is really critical. But we must also pray for discernment to evaluate those times when the more helpful thing for the individual is to guide him toward ways of asking for help and attention that are appropriate and productive.

One leader I know sometimes invites drop-in guests to lend a hand with simple chores or help with minding her young children. This has proved very helpful for one guest in particular whose real problem is that she does not feel useful or important to anyone else. Hospitality takes many forms in practice.

- **Playing favorites.** Group leaders should also keep in mind that they must not be seen playing favorites among group members. It's not realistic to try and treat everyone equally in terms of time and attention, but do make sure that you don't camp out with some members and exclude others.

## Get the Right View of Interruptions

If we look at the ministry of Jesus, it was quite striking in regards to timing. We seldom see Jesus convening a small group (with of course notable exceptions such as the occasion of the Last Supper). What we do see is Jesus constantly being interrupted as he moves from place to place and as he teaches.

What is particularly instructive and inspiring for group leaders is the way Jesus responds to these interruptions. Much of his meaningful contact with those who do not know him came at times and places that were unscheduled, and often not very convenient. For example, Jesus was going with a distraught father whose child was in immediate danger of dying, when someone reached out and touched him. Right away, Jesus stopped to offer an astonishing display of hospitality to this woman who had suffered with a chronic problem for a dozen years.

The lesson in such examples from the Gospels is central to our offerings of hospitality. We may need a brand new attitude with regard to interruptions. Specifically, we need to view each interruption as God's favoring us with a sacred opportunity to respond to him and to his children. When the phone or the doorbell brings and we are in the middle of something *important*, we need to pause and realize that God is calling us to respond to this unplanned appearance as it is sent from him.

Hospitality is not something we practice at designated times and places. Rather it is a way of being in the world that is open and responsive and kind. It is flexible and undemanding. And there is a true joy it brings to us and to the ones we serve, as we practice hospitality as our offering to our Lord.

—LINDA MCCULLOUGH-MOORE; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

## Discuss:

1. How much cleaning do you undertake when you know people are coming to visit? Does the process frustrate you?
2. Would you feel guilty if those same people cleaned as much when you visited them?
3. What interruptions have bothered you in the past week? Are there steps you can take to begin welcoming unexpected people and events?



## How to Write Effective Bible Study Questions

*Make sure your questions fit these four criteria.*

By Terry Powell

Brad fed my soul from the pulpit. He combined seminary training with passion, so it was rare when God's Spirit did not challenge or encourage me through his sermons. But sitting in the young marrieds Sunday school class he led was a different experience altogether. Brad tried to jump-start discussion by asking questions, but I got the impression he was "winging it"; his questions were speculative and vague and didn't stimulate our thinking about the Bible passage at hand. I grew frustrated.

Brad made a mistake common to small-group leaders and teachers who lead Bible discussions: he didn't prepare his questions in advance. In her book *Improving Your Classroom Teaching*, Maryellen Weimer says: "Questioning may be the most common, widely used, and universally accepted instruction strategy. And therein lies the problem. It is much too taken for granted." Like many, Brad took the discussion process for granted and didn't prepare as he should have.

You don't need a seminary degree to be an excellent discussion leader. But you do need to prepare. As you do so, think about whether your discussion questions fit these four criteria: clear, focused, sensitive, and thought-provoking. Many questions fail on one or more of these counts, and listed below are some examples. For the purpose of these examples, let's assume we're leading a Bible study on Matthew 4:1–11, where Jesus is tempted in the wilderness.

### Good Questions Are Clear

Plain, easy-to-grasp language allows a question to penetrate someone's thinking. Make sure your questions aren't ambiguous. Recite them aloud. Test them on your spouse or friend to see if the intent is clear.

As you do, be on the lookout for these muddling questions:

#### 1. "What about" Questions

Starting questions with "What about...?" clouds the purpose of your question. When participants hear this, they shrug their shoulders and think, "Well, what about it?"

- **Bad:** What about the fact that Satan quoted Scripture during his confrontation of Jesus?
- **Better:** What does Satan's use of Scripture tell us about him?

#### 2. Long-Winded Questions

Another foe of clarity is a question that is too long. We often overstuff a question by inserting facts or statements that set up the actual question. But if you put those statements in front of the question rather than inside it, group members will have an easier time processing the question.

- **Bad:** Looking at the devil in action tempting Jesus in the wilderness, what specific qualities and strategies of spiritual warfare that he will also use against us does he demonstrate?
- **Better:** The tactics Satan used against Jesus will also be used against us. What characteristics and strategies did Satan demonstrate in this episode?

#### 3. Compound Questions

Rein in the impulse to fling back-to-back questions at your group without waiting for a reply to the first one. One question at a time! Either they will be confused about which question to answer first, or they will simply forget the first question when you ask the second one.

- **Bad:** What happened right before the first temptation, and what does this timing tell us about Satan?

- **Better:** What happened right before the first temptation? (Pause for replies.) What does this timing tell us about Satan?

### Good Questions Are Focused

We want to prod group members toward the main truths in a passage. They may not arrive there if we ask questions that pull them away from the text or the core parts of the text. For example:

#### 1. *Speculative Questions*

Such a question seeks information not found in the Bible, which encourages group members to conjecture rather than investigate and analyze the text.

- **Bad:** When the devil left, angels ministered to Jesus. How do you think the angels ministered to Him in this situation?
- **Also bad:** If Jesus had listened to Satan and jumped off the pinnacle of the temple, what do you think would have happened?

#### 2. *Irrelevant Questions*

This type of question “majors in the minors.” It dissects a word, phrase, or name in a verse without consideration of the passage’s larger context or governing theme. It focuses on details that are unrelated to the primary truths in the text.

- **Bad:** Satan tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Where else are stones mentioned in the Bible?

#### 3. *Subjective Questions*

Unintentionally, some leaders transfer the authority from God’s Word to group members by instructing them to look inward for meaning rather than investigating the text.

- **Bad:** What does verse 11 mean to you?
- **Better:** How does verse 11 show God the Father’s sensitivity to the Son?

### Good Questions Are Sensitive

To be considerate toward participants, avoid these kinds of questions:

#### 1. *Compulsory Personal Questions*

Yes, you want group members to connect truths with stories from their own lives. And if your group prays together, then as God’s Word shows members their needs, you want them to admit those needs so that your group can lift them up. Transparency is a vital sign of group health. Just don’t ambush a group member with an unsolicited, deeply personal question.

- **Bad:** Marge, you’ve been a Christian for a few years. Can you tell us how you’ve experienced Satan’s persistence in his warfare against you?
- **Better:** Who can illustrate Satan’s persistence from your pilgrimage as a Christian?

Now the member who responds does so willingly. Better yet, share your own response first to model the transparency that you’re after. Then ask, “Anyone else?”

#### 2. *Unrealistic Questions*

Questions are unrealistic when they seek background or cross-reference information that a typical group member won’t know. If such information is necessary, just give it to them.

- **Bad (depending on the group):** What Old Testament book did Jesus quote to refute Satan?
- **Better:** Turn to Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13. As you can see, Jesus uses these verses to reveal the nature of each of Satan’s temptations.

### Good Questions Are Thought-Provoking

Group members will have a more enthusiastic discussion if your questions truly force them to think. The following kinds of questions will *not* do that:

#### 1. *Yes/No Questions*

Omit questions that begin with Do, Did, Was, Were, Is, Are—anything that calls for a mere yes or no response. You usually want more than just a one-word reply, so formulate the question accordingly.

- **Bad:** Did Satan recognize Jesus true identity as God’s Son?
- **Better:** What in the text suggests that Satan knew Jesus identity?

### 2. *Obvious Questions*

Who wants to respond to a question when the answer is obvious to everyone?

- **Bad:** What did the angels do when they appeared in verse 11?
- **Better:** What were the three temptations thrust upon Jesus?

Factual questions are more challenging when they require participants to read two or more verses for the answer, or to find multiple answers.

### 3. *Leading Questions*

This is yet another way to insult rather than to incite members’ intellects. A leading question sags under the weight of your own predetermined notion. How you formulate such a question actually reveals the answer that you want to hear. Instead of encouraging people to think about the text, you are, in effect, asking them whether or not they agree with you. Most leading questions are yes/no questions, but framed negatively (“Don’t you think...” or “Isn’t...”).

- **Bad:** Don’t you think the timing of Satan’s attack on Jesus was significant?
- **Better:** This episode occurs right after Jesus’ baptism and God the Father’s affirmation at the end of Matthew 3. And it happens right before the launch of Jesus’ public ministry. What can we learn about our enemy from the timing of his attacks on Jesus?

If you prepare Bible study questions that are clear, focused, sensitive, and thought-provoking, you will succeed as a discussion leader. The next time you plan a Bible discussion for your group, evaluate the questions you write in light of these criteria.

— TERRY POWELL is author of [Now That’s a Good Question: How to Lead Quality Bible Discussions](#) (Standard, 2007). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### **Discuss:**

1. Which of the questions types above do you dislike the most?
2. Which of the types of questions above have you used in past Bible studies?
3. What steps can you take to avoid using them in the future?



## The Basics of Leading Group Prayer

*Helpful keys for apprentices and veteran group leaders alike.*

By Andrew Wheeler

One of the best ways for small-group members to know one another deeply is to pray together. Yet many group leaders struggle to facilitate meaningful prayer experiences that go below the surface—they just don't know how. The result is either a shallow community prayer life or none at all. The following principles will help apprentices and leaders lay the groundwork for a fruitful and effective small-group prayer life.

### Prepare the Foundation

To get your small group started in prayer, you'll need to do three things. First, recognize how group members feel about prayer—both private prayer and group prayer. Be sure to encourage people to express any reservations or negative experiences they have had. Encouraging our groups to grow in prayer begins with understanding and addressing any obstacles that members may feel.

Second, you'll likely need to cast a vision for community prayer, especially if your group is not in the habit of praying together. I recommend studying the Early Church's experiences with prayer throughout the Book of Acts (Acts 1:14; 1:23–26; 2:42; 4:23–31; 6:4; 12:5,12; 13:3; 16:25; 20:36). Note the varying circumstances surrounding prayer and God's responses.

The final step of laying the foundation for a strong community prayer life is developing the group's commitment to confidentiality regarding any items shared. Hopefully, your group has already built a level of trust to help with this foundation. Some groups find it helpful to develop a formal confidentiality agreement that group members sign. This can be especially useful if the group is relatively new or has new members.

### Provide the Framework

As you start your group down the pathway of praying together, be sure to instruct members clearly. Some may be used to "anything goes" prayer times without a lot of structure. But agreeing on a common set of guidelines and expectations will help everyone participate on an equal footing, regardless of their individual level of experience in prayer.

Many groups find it helpful to divide the prayer/sharing time by person, rather than having everyone share first and then having everyone pray. There are several advantages to this approach: better control over the time that each member takes, assurance that each group member is covered in prayer, ease of remembering the prayer requests, and improved participation. One way to accomplish this would be to evenly divide the time allotted to prayer between individuals and ask each member to spend half their time sharing their requests, then pray for the other half. For example, if a 6-member group were going to share and pray for 30 minutes, each person would get a total of 5 minutes in turn – 2 ½ for sharing and then 2 ½ for the group to pray. 30 minutes may seem like a long time to pray, but arranged this way, the time speeds by and people stay engaged.

Whether or not your group chooses to follow a format like this, be sure to establish some framework that provides time for each person, so that no one dominates the prayer time and no one is left out. Be sensitive, however, to the Holy Spirit's leading for occasions when you may need to make exceptions to your normal pattern in order to focus on one group member who is in a time of special need.

### Preserve the Focus

Encourage group members to share personal prayer requests, rather than a steady stream of needs for family and friends. The occasional crisis in the life of a friend or family member may be a valid prayer concern, but a consistent external focus can indicate lack of trust in the group, lack of accountability, or issues that the person may be trying to hide from the rest of the group. Focusing on personal requests also helps the group to stay engaged—group members generally find it more meaningful to pray for each other, rather than praying for outside friends and family members that most of them will never meet.

Additionally, urge group members to think beyond the surface when sharing prayer requests. Jesus encouraged us to rely on God in prayer for our daily needs, but his instruction on prayer and the examples of his own prayers went much further. Thus, in the Lord's Prayer, we're taught to pray for provision of our needs in the context of God's name being honored, his kingdom coming, and his will being done. We pray for ourselves, but our overriding concern is that God be glorified in our lives as he answers prayer—just as Moses prayed for the salvation of Israel out of a primary concern for how God's name would be viewed among the nations.

There are many ways to help group members think past the surface as they share their prayer needs. A study of the prayers of Paul in the Epistles may be a good place to start. Or you could start the sharing time by asking the group to focus on one or two questions, such as “What are you most grateful for today? What are you least grateful for today?” or “Where do you most feel God's encouragement right now? If you start the sharing time this way, give people a few minutes of silence before having the first member start.

### Pray to the Father

Community prayer is fundamentally different from private prayer because of the added “horizontal” dimension. Private prayer involves only the “vertical” dimension of the believer's relationship to God, but community prayer adds the horizontal dimension of relationships among the believers. Praying in community can best be thought of as “praying *to* God *with* people.” It's easy to miss one of these dimensions as you pray together, but clearly establishing some guidelines will help group members pray together effectively.

- *Pray briefly.* Nothing discourages wide participation in prayer more than an individual praying long, winding prayers. Such prayer causes people to disengage as their thoughts wander. Long prayers also intimidate others who are less experienced in prayer, keeping them from participating. Finally, long prayers communicate to the rest of the group that the one praying is not interested in the participation of others, and can subtly damage the unity in the group.

Encourage the group to limit their prayers so that others can participate. Remember the example I gave above: if half of the 30-minute prayer time is devoted to sharing and half to prayer, that would mean that each of the five group members would have an average of 30 seconds praying for the person who shared! Five people each praying brief, direct prayers will be much more engaged than four people listening to one person dominate the entire prayer time.

- *Address God.* One of the biggest temptations of community prayer is addressing our prayers to each other, rather than to God. Individuals may use prayer to speak into each other's lives rather than lifting them up before God. Our task in intercession is to speak to God on behalf of one another, not to presume to speak to each other on behalf of God. Well-meaning group members can significantly damage relationships and even faith by counseling or preaching in prayer.

To avoid this, teach the group to focus their prayers on what they are asking God to do, rather than on changes they want individuals to make. Grammatically, if God is the subject of most of the verbs in our prayers (“Lord, please strengthen and encourage Joe”) rather than a person being the subject (“Lord, may Joe have faith to trust in you”), then our prayers have the needed vertical focus.

- *Agree together.* The major difference between praying in community and praying alone is the additional God-provided power that comes from agreeing together in prayer (Matthew 18:19–20). Instruct the group to enter into the prayers of the one who is praying, rather than thinking about what they will pray when their “turn” comes. Encourage them to pick up on each other's prayers and topics rather than always introducing something new as they pray. As a group, seek God's will and leading for one another rather than having individuals each pray their own understanding into situations.

### Propel the Group Forward

Most groups begin their prayer lives praying for group members. As the group grows in prayer, you may want to stretch by incorporating shared confession (James 5:16) to further deepen your relationships. Additionally, you may decide to adopt a “prayer mission”—a focus on something outside the group, such as a ministry, missionary, or world event.

At each step in your group's prayer journey, communicate expectations clearly. Remind the group often of principles of effective group prayer. Your group's growth in prayer will be reflected in deeper relationships with each other and with God.

—ANDREW WHEELER is author of [Together in Prayer: Coming to God in Community](#) (IVP, 2009). Copyright 2010 by the author and Christianity Today International.



## Engaging Conflict in Small Groups

*A look at the deeper issues underlying personality clashes.*

Philippians 2:3–4

Sooner or later, every small group will experience conflict. In some groups, conflict will become evident from the first meeting. In others, great pain is taken to avoid conflict. The members maneuver around it and make it clear that “we don’t do conflict here.” But the ways we behave in a small group reflect how we will behave outside of it, and handling conflict well in our group can lead to better ways of dealing with the uncomfortable issues people face every day.

### A Case Study

Mary and Jim are group members. Mary sees herself as a “truth-speaker.” She is perceptive and reads people like a map. She is always aware of the “temperature” of her small group. She listens to what is said and has an ability to hear what isn’t being said—and she is more curious about the later. Her greatest desire is for authenticity and honesty. Everybody sees Jim as a “grace-giver.” He is trusting and takes people at face value. He values peace, and patience is one of his greatest virtues. He is affirming and very sensitive to the shame in others. His overriding desire for the group is that it feels safe, loving, and supportive.

Mary and Jim, to one degree or another, are in every group. Every group needs what they offer. But before Mary and Jim can offer what is best in them, they will have to face the inevitable conflict that their styles of relating will create.

Behind every conflict is a story that goes far deeper than the presenting clash. Jim grew up in a home with a dominating, angry mother. His father would work hard all day and come home to a wife who would dump her frustrations on him. Jim felt sorry for his father and felt contempt for his mother. She was not the “Proverbs 31” woman he heard about in church. But his father never complained. He was “longsuffering.” Jim often wished his father would confront his mother, but he felt pretty sure his father would lose that battle.

Mary grew up in a home that had lots of secrets. No one talked about dad’s alcoholism. No one dared ruffle dad’s feathers when he came home, even though the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. When Mary was sexually abused by her father, and later by her brother, her mother had a lock installed on Mary’s door but never talked about what happened. Mary sat behind her locked door angrier with her mother than with her abusers. Secrets and silence became the enemies that Mary vowed to fight.

Now, Mary and Jim find themselves in the same small group. It doesn’t take long for Mary to pigeonhole Jim as a weak wimp who is more comfortable with the appearance of harmony than the guts to be honest. And, hard as it is for Jim to admit, Mary’s pursuit of people feels dangerous and makes him want to avoid her.

In group, Mary is frustrated every time Jim seems to dismiss someone’s struggles with a verse from the Bible and an offer to pray. Conversely, Jim feels that Mary plows right into areas of shame with little sensitivity. Sometimes it seems that Mary’s outrage over injustice is stronger than anyone else’s. Jim feels that he must counter her impact by soothing the group.

Unless this conflict is addressed, it will further propagate the dysfunction that both Jim and Mary felt in their families growing up. The group will not be strong enough to bear “truth-speaking,” and it will feel that its “grace-giving” is patronizing. The safe, loving, honest, and authentic community will be lost.

### A New Perspective

Conflict should not be viewed as a problem that threatens to destroy your group, but as an opportunity to grow the group. It is the unacknowledged and unaddressed conflict that is dangerous. Conflict that is entered into and resolved leads to deeper intimacy, whether in a group, a marriage, between two individuals, or with God.

As you think about addressing a conflict, ask yourself how to engage the issue while still valuing the opinions, observations, and feelings of each member. Remember also that, because the enemy of our souls delights in

continued division, engaging in conflict resolution is warfare against him. So prayer is a crucial weapon. Ask for receptive hearts, listening ears, and a resolve to strengthen the unity of the group by honestly facing the issues at hand.

Depending on the severity of the conflict and who is involved, you may need an outside person to facilitate a resolution. If so, you will want to make that person's role clear—to facilitate and mediate the resolution process, not to resolve the conflict themselves.

### A Practical Method

So how does a group enter into conflict for the good of its members? Here are a few simple steps to work through:

1. The group leader should define the conflict as he/she recalls it. "Our conflict is about the differences between Jim's way and Mary's way of engaging the group and the tension that we and they are experiencing as a result."
2. Ask the group members if the conflict has been defined correctly as they recall it. Go around the circle and give each person an opportunity to respond. Some will have something to say; others may simply nod their head in agreement.
3. Ask, "How has this conflict felt to you?" Or, "What has been stirred up in you as the conflict has become evident?" The purpose here is to give each group member an opportunity to acknowledge and express their feelings. There is no right or wrong answer here. Silence or withholding does not support the conflict resolution process, so encourage everyone to speak.
4. Invite group members to ask questions of any other member for clarity. Be careful to make sure that one person does not dominate this time so that the process begins to lose momentum for the others.
5. Ask each person: "What were you hoping would happen in this meeting?" "What did you want for yourself?" "What did you want for Jim, Mary, or the group?"
6. Ask each person what needs to happen for them to feel that this is a safe and healthy group again. What a member may express may not necessarily be something the group can guarantee (e.g. that the conflict will never happen again). The leader's role is to make sure all have been heard and to stay engaged in the process for the sake of the group. Allowing the process to stall or wander will make the group feel unsafe and lose trust.
7. Ask each person, "Can you recommit to this group?" If someone says "no," go back to points 3 and 4 and try again. Typically a group will want to get going again and not remain stalled.

This process relies on the integrity of the group to call one another out. At its best, it is a way for the body of Christ to minister to each other. Here are some questions for a leader to keep in mind during this process:

- Did the people in the conflict hear one another accurately? It is often helpful to ask Jim what he heard Mary say. Then ask Mary, "Did Jim hear you accurately?" Reverse the process, asking Mary what she heard Jim say. Many conflicts escalate due to faulty perceptions as communication passes through each participant's emotional filter.
- Did each person take ownership of what they perceived to be their part in the conflict? If your group is at a stage where you can go deeper, these discipleship questions can lead to real change: 1) Is this a pattern in my life? 2) How does this pattern in my life affect those in relationship with me? 3) How do I feel about the way I impact others? 4) Who or what does this situation remind me of?
- Has any group boundary been broken? If so, is this something (or is there something else) we need to need to talk about now or later?

When you notice a conflict is occurring, be ready to pull out this list and walk through it. Believe me, your group will be grateful for you and your courage. Many of your group members live daily with chaos and conflict that never gets resolved, so your willingness to enter into conflict is a real gift to them!

—MARK BONHAM; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### Discuss:

1. In what ways has our group experienced conflict in recent months?
2. What will be the hardest thing about addressing conflict in our group? How can we overcome that?
3. What steps should we take to begin engaging and resolving our conflicts in the near future?



## Counseling With Compassion and Competence

*Learn what to do (and what not to do) when supporting grieving group members.*

By Kathy Collard Miller

Whether you are a small-group leader or an apprentice, there are a lot of things about group life that can make you feel unqualified. But for most people, few things are scarier than the idea of offering support and counsel to a group member going through a rough time.

When we aren't professional counselors, helping others with their struggles feels like a tremendous challenge. Yet it can be done with compassion and competence. So how can we learn? The first step is to learn what not to do, and the Book of Job gives us some warnings about the wrong kind of counsel. In fact, Job called his friends "sorry comforters" (Job 16:2). We can avoid being known that way by remembering the following points.

### What Not to Do

First, avoid giving blanket statements to someone who is in grief. In Job 4, notice that Job's friends give him the impression that the innocent do not suffer; therefore, Job must be guilty of *something*. They also throw several pat answers at Job without any hint of compassion. For example, Eliphaz says, "As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (4:8). What's interesting is that Job's friends didn't ask any questions. If they really wanted to know Job's heart, they would have found out he had a tremendous passion for God.

Unfortunately, I was a "sorry comforter" one day when a woman told me she recently had a miscarriage. Not knowing what to say, I replied, "Well, the Lord will give you another child." I realized later that by saying something obvious and without understanding, I had totally missed an opportunity to minister to her by asking questions about her grief.

The best question we can ask is: "How does this problem make you feel about God?" This allows us to uncover any incorrect beliefs the person holds about God, and we can then help them see the truth. Another important question you can ask is: "How does this make you feel about yourself?" For instance, a hurting person often believes she needs her circumstances (or another person) to change. She says, "I'm angry because my husband doesn't give me enough attention." "I'm frustrated because my coworker disregards my ideas." "I'm embarrassed because my child isn't behaving."

For problems like these, our natural reaction is to try to brainstorm ways she can change the other person or the circumstances. But that's going in the wrong direction. We can't change anyone else. God is more interested in us finding out what incorrect ideas we believe that are creating our ungodly response. Although it seems like we're justified in feeling angry, frustrated, or embarrassed, those reactions are actually based on wrong ideas about ourselves. We need to correct them with the truth. For instance: My husband's inattention makes me feel unloved, but the truth is that only God can love me unconditionally (Romans 5:8). My coworker's disregard makes me feel stupid, but God says I have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). My child's disobedience makes me feel powerless, but God says I can do all things through Christ (Philippians 4:13).

The second thing we should not do is try to squelch a group member's doubts or struggles with faith as they experience grief or anger. Looking back at Job, it's obvious that Job's friends did not want to hear any of his grief or doubts. The same thing happens today when some Christians say we shouldn't express any doubts about God. But in reality, Jesus responded graciously to the father who said, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). God honors honesty—He knows our feelings and thoughts anyway. So we can allow our group members to express their feelings and doubts without trying to "fix" them.

The third thing you should not do is assume that you have all the answers and all of the wisdom necessary to deal with your group member's grief or difficult situation. Here's what Bildad says to Job in the middle of their interaction: "When will you end these speeches? Be sensible, and then we can talk. Why are we regarded

as cattle and considered stupid in your sight?” (18:2–3). Here’s what Bildad is really saying: “Accept everything we say without argument or discernment. We know what’s best for you.” But isn’t that like playing God—to tell someone everything they should be doing? As group leaders and apprentices, we should avoid becoming such insensitive and unwise counselors.

Finally, when one of our group members expresses pain or sorrow, we should not speak out of a compulsion to speak. We should not think, *I have to say something!* In Job 32, a man named Elihu has been listening to Job and his friends. Finally, he can’t stand it anymore and he bursts out, “I too will have my say; I too will tell what I know. For I am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me” (32:17–18). Most often, hurting people need a quiet counselor as they talk in order for them to work through what God is saying. Of course, if you are in the middle of a small-group setting, you may need to request that this happen after the meeting has ended.

### Other Inappropriate Responses

- *Fast solutions.* Saying “You should just...” to someone is never helpful. It makes it seem like you’re guaranteeing of a fast solution, and usually there aren’t any fast solutions to emotional pain.
- *Shock.* “I can’t believe you did/said that!” Such a reaction is not helpful, so control yourself.
- *Unrealistic expectations of their ability to cope.* Never give the impression that someone’s problems should be solved by now. “Why haven’t you conquered this yet?”
- *Making promises you can’t keep.* “I’ll always be here for you!” This cannot be a true statement.
- *Saying something reassuring that may not be true.* I made this mistake some time ago when a friend faced cancer. She asked me, “You don’t think it’s God’s will for me to die, do you?” I replied, “Oh, no, I’m sure that won’t happen.” But I was wrong and when she died, I knew I had misrepresented the Lord.
- *Comparing sorrows.* Telling a group member about so-and-so who is also struggling with the same thing has no value unless there’s some practical point to it. Otherwise, they could feel like they are in competition with someone else to see who has the most pain.

### What You Can Do

Now let’s look at some positive responses to a group member who shares a difficult or painful situation.

1. *Help the hurting person find the underlying cause of their hurt.* People usually focus on what seems to be the obvious, current reason for their pain. But sometimes the cause may be from their past. Jill expressed anger with her husband because he wouldn’t attend their daughter’s drill-team performances. I asked her about her childhood and amongst other things she said, “My father never watched my band performances.” She saw the connection and realized that, because she’d never forgiven her father, she was overreacting to her husband’s responses. In tears, she said she wanted to forgive both of them.
2. *Reflect back their feelings (Romans 12:15).* Say things like, “I can really hear the hurt in your voice.” Or, “You must really be feeling angry about that.”
3. *Express realistic expectations of growth or healing (Philippians 1:6).* Don’t promise instant deliverance or fast growth. Healing and growth usually take a while, but your group members will grow closer to God as they work through their struggles. One of the most important biblical concepts I speak about is the “One Percent Principle.” I teach others to strive for small steps of growth rather than making “100 percent” goals, which are unrealistic and create a sense of failure. When you advise steps of growth, make them small.
4. *Help in practical ways (Romans 12:13).* If a group member needs help, direct them to someone who can provide the assistance they need. This may seem simplistic, but people experiencing grief often don’t have the emotional strength to follow through. Making a few phone calls on their behalf may be the difference between success and failure.
5. *Pray with them (Philippians 1:4).* It’s often effective to pray something like, “Heavenly Father, Suzie is really feeling depressed and desperate right now....” Bringing their pain before God’s throne will comfort and affirm them.

6. *Say too little rather than too much (James 1:19)*. It may be hard, but sometimes your silence is more supportive than lots of words. I remember a time when a woman shared a deep sin, and I was speechless. Later she told me that my silence was encouraging and helped her move out of her struggle. I'd thought I'd been a failure because I did not have the right words, but God knew what she needed.
7. *Find out their definition of support (Galatians 6:2,5)*. What exactly do they think will help them? Ask, rather than assume. Your questions will also direct them toward a point of action. Asking questions helps them to think more clearly than if you just told them what they should do.

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**Discuss:**

1. Does the idea of offering support and counsel to a hurting person scare you or excite you? Why?
2. Can you remember a time when you felt supported in a difficult situation? What happened?
3. Which of the “don’ts” listed above have you experienced? Which do you need to stop using?



## Further Exploration

*Websites and books to help you grow into your role as an apprentice.*

**[SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com)**. Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International.

1. [Small-Group Host](#): Orientation Guide
2. [Small-Group Facilitator](#): Orientation Guide
3. [How to Prepare for a Bible Study](#): Practical Ministry Skills

**[LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net)**. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Dealing with Difficult People** by *Jill Briscoe*. A practical guide for handling the problem people in your life (David C. Cook, 2003; 978-0781439510).

**I'm a Leader...Now What?** by *Michael Mack*. Practical advice on how to guide and maintain an effective small group (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720769).

**Making Small Groups Work** by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. This book provides small-group leaders with valuable guidance and information on how they can help their groups to grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally (Zondervan; ISBN 978-0310255123).<sup>3</sup>

**Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice** by *Teena M. Stewart*. A solid and practical book that covers all the bases (Beacon Hill Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0834122373).

**[The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community](#)** by *Randy Frazee*. This book paints a beautiful portrait of biblical community and talks about the sacrifices we will have to make in order to experience life together (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 978-0310233084).