

Leading a Small Group

INTRODUCTION

- **It's not your group.** Being a leader does not mean being an owner. The group ultimately belongs to God. On the one hand, this reality should humble us out of our pride and possessiveness. On the other hand, it should free us to love people as we are and as they are in Christ's name.
- **God is at work.** He loves you and others in your group more than you do. And it's his work that produces maturity in us (John 15:5). The main goal is to get together in fellowship around Scripture. We trust God to work through these ordinary ways.
- **Keep the gospel at the center.** The gospel is the true story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ (see the appendix at the end of these notes). We want the gospel to define who we are and set the course for all that we do.

GOSPEL CULTURE¹

the "feel" of the group

What kind of place are we trying to cultivate?

1. A place where the stereotypical church culture does not hide the gospel (i.e., "insider" language, habits, customs, etc.).
2. A place where hurting people are welcomed, cared for, and shown the gospel.
3. A place where people can have time to process the gospel and faith. This may take a long time. It is often messy.
4. A place where people want to bring their friends, whether they share our beliefs or not.
5. A place where the dignity of each individual is respected.
6. A place where honesty and trust are high priorities.
7. A place where the gospel is known and proclaimed by what we say and how we live.

GOSPEL PRIORITIES²

the concerns of the group

How can we be instruments of change in one another's lives?

1. **Love:** Just as God loves us through a personal relationship (called a "covenant"), so are we called to build strong personal relationships as we minister to one another. Ask God to help you love indiscriminately, as Christ loved people. This involves entering into their worlds and identifying with their confusion, joy, and suffering. Be intentional, both with people in your group and with those you plan to invite.

¹ Fred Harold, "Culture of the Gospel"

² Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*

2. **Know**: Make it a priority to know the individuals in your group. Don't assume you already know them by the stereotypes they seem to fit into. Ask thoughtful questions. Get to know their stories, beliefs, goals, values, etc. Each individual reflects both the dignity of God and the ruin of sin.
3. **Speak**: Speaking involves helping your group to see how the gospel applies to their lives. You can't have a relationship with someone unless you're willing to speak the truth in love, and receive it back. We need the courage, wisdom, and humility to speak God's Word to one another.
4. **Do**: Insight alone is not enough; we must help one another in practical ways. How is God calling us to trust and obey Him? How can we lovingly provide structure, guidance, assistance, and accountability for one another?

GOSPEL COMMUNITY

the relational direction of the group

How do we measure our social life as a Christian community?

1. **Cohesion**: Do we know and care for one another? Is there a spirit of trust, mutuality, and closeness?
2. **Welcome**: Do we reach out to others? Is there a spirit of welcome, generosity, and openness?
3. **Investment**: Do we commit to one another? Is there a spirit of devotion, faithfulness, and sacrifice?
4. **Spontaneity**: Do we connect informally? Is there a spirit of enjoyment, freedom, and celebration?

GETTING STARTED

1. **Reflection**
 - a. Think about your best small group experience. What made it good?
 - b. Think about the needs around you. How can a small group help?
2. **Purpose**: What will your group focus on most?
 - a. **Discussion**: A group centered on study and conversation. This is most commonly a bible study, but could be a book discussion as well.
 - b. **Fellowship**: A group centered on getting to know one another and caring for one another. Groups meet to share their lives and engage in mutual accountability.
 - c. **Service**: A group centered on addressing the physical, material, and emotional needs of their neighbors inside and outside the group.
 - d. Groups can certainly be a combination of all of these, though usually one becomes the group's central reason for gathering.

3. **Gathering:** How will you pull a group together?

- a. **Invite people personally.** There is no substitute for a personal invitation. Talk to a person face-to-face or make a phone call.
- b. **Communicate honestly and persuasively.** No gimmicks. When you invite someone, explain what the group will be doing and why you think he/she should be involved. If a person isn't interested, then leave the door open if something changes.
- c. **Don't be ruled by your assumptions.** Don't assume someone is going to say yes or no based on what you think his/her level of interest might be. We are practicing indiscriminate love. God often surprises us in ministry.

4. **Preparation**

- a. **Prayer:** The first step is prayer. Pray that God would give you insight and wisdom. Pray that people would come. Pray that the group would be a tool God uses to transform lives.
- b. **Content:** Decide on a format for your group: discussion, fellowship, or service. If discussion, what will you be studying? If fellowship, what will you be doing to encourage the formation of gospel-centered relationships? If service, whom will you be serving and how?
- c. **Structure:** Start working out the details of the time sequence for your meeting. For example: How long will you casually talk at the beginning? How long will the discussion take? How much time will you allow for sharing? How much time will you reserve for prayer?
- d. **Details:** This includes all the arrangements that still need to be made: place, seating, email or text reminders, rides, etc.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Find a co-leader to help you and a staff member to process with.
- Make sure you have clearly defined goals for the group. You can be flexible and prepared at the same time.
- Learn to ask good questions. (See the handout, "Leading a Bible Study" for specific help on asking good questions.)
- Silence is acceptable. Don't start talking when you feel uncomfortable with the silence. Give the group time to process and linger in the tension. If everyone looks confused, you may have to clarify or restate the question.
- Total overall participation in a small group decreases as the size of the group increases. If your group grows to over 10 regular participants, there will be new challenges to meet. We think this is a good problem to have. We would love to have groups spin off and multiply.

- Where you meet matters. Pick a place that is convenient, hospitable, and private if you're leading a discussion-focused group.
- Be sensitive to people's fears. The biggest fear in a small group is being asked to pray out loud. The second biggest fear is being asked to read the bible out loud. One of the greatest ways to diffuse fears is to name things: "You know that most people are terrified to pray out loud in front of people...."
- Set ground rules: "What gets said here in this group stays in this group." "Let's keep in mind that we come from different places, which means we will have different perspectives. We don't have to agree, but we have to treat one another with dignity and respect."
- It is perfectly okay to say, "I don't know," if you don't know. In fact, that is EXACTLY what you should say instead of fumbling your way through it. We are trying to cultivate a place of honesty, not a place of expertise where everything gets tied up nicely at the end. Also, some questions are deep and complex. We don't want to provide trite answers or bumper sticker slogans to the mysteries of our faith.
- Affirm effort, not performance. If people are participating, then that is a good thing.
- Be faithful with your group members' time. If you say the meeting is going to last an hour, then keep it to an hour. This speaks to your credibility as a leader.

THINGS TO DO TOGETHER

- Dinner – find a new place or cook together.
- Pray together: praise God, ask for help, pray for others.
- Read a Scripture passage and discuss it. Go through a bible study together.
- Go to church together. Eat lunch afterwards and discuss the sermon.
- Share your stories of God's grace. (Use the handout, "How To Think About Your Testimony" to give you a framework. You'll find it on our website.)
- Volunteer at Mercy Street or another ministry around Dallas.
- Take an overnight trip. Go to someone's home, a ranch, camping, etc.
- Study together in the library. You have to do it anyway.
- Plan something fun with another small group. Do something unique to SMU or Dallas.
- Help out with an RUF event or plan your own.

- Read an article on the RUF website and discuss it. Start with Tim Keller's article, "How Can I Know God" or C. S. Lewis' sermon, "The Weight of Glory."
- Meet at Dedman for basketball, volleyball, or kickboxing.
- Plan to go to RUF together... and dinner beforehand.
- Memorize a passage of Scripture together.

APPENDIX: WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The Gospel is the good news that God is making all things new through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the true story of who God is, who we are, and how we fit into God's world.

CREATION (goodness, dignity, mission)

In the beginning, God created the world to His own delight and satisfaction. But all things were not created equal. The climax of God's creation was humanity made in His own image, a reality which gives us both tremendous dignity and responsibility. We were made to relate personally to God in love and trust. And we have a mission in God's world - to reflect His character throughout creation. This involves taking care of the world as we cultivate its God-given potential, filling it with the love and splendor and joy of God.

FALL (rebellion, loss, corruption)

However, something has gone terribly wrong. The first couple rebelled against God, inviting shame, brokenness, alienation, and death into God's world. As their children, we are all complicit in their defiance. Instead of reflecting God's character, we are defined by our self-centeredness and experience corruption as both villains and victims. Sin has not brought the freedom we had hoped for, but destroyed the freedom we once possessed. We deserve judgment; we need grace.

REDEMPTION (Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, faith)

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14) The God who made us has not abandoned us. Jesus came to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth, to restore what sin has ruined. He came to rule, not by power or force, but by humility and compassion, culminating in his death on a Roman cross. This was no ordinary death, however. Jesus' suffering was God's triumph over the powers of evil and the complete satisfaction for our sin. After three days, Jesus was raised from the dead, bearing in his body the promise of God's final vindication and our full renewal. We participate in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection by entrusting ourselves to him and living under his gracious authority.

FULFILLMENT (cosmic, renewal, justice)

The end of the story is still to come. Jesus has promised to return and bring the fullness of his rule - to make the whole world right. Here is how one of Jesus' first followers described this coming day:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more...." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Rev. 21:2-5)

This is the hope of the gospel. Until then, we pray and work for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.