

TIPS FOR LEADING A SMALL GROUP

Hi small group leaders! Thank you for serving the saints by hosting a small group this semester. I'd like to pass on a couple of tips regarding the start of your upcoming small group. Depending on the topic and the "newness" of your group, these are some things I always try to keep in mind when I start a small group. If they don't apply, you can disregard this information, I hope they are helpful!

SPECIFIC SESSION #1 TIPS

- Keep in mind the group is brand new, so it would be wise to give people time to introduce one another.
- As an ice breaker, maybe ask each person to share "One reason you are excited about this SG?"
- Remember, don't answer every question, draw people out – help THEM answer the questions.
- Don't assume everyone in your group is a Christian – some may think they are, but they are not.
- Some in your group may have never experienced a small group before. That's OK –just be patient and prepared to make them feel comfortable and to help answer any questions they have.
- Explain up front how a typical group meeting might flow (see "Suggested Format" below).

SUGGESTED FORMAT (90 MINUTE MEETING)

- **15 minutes: Greet & Treat**
Welcome people and have name tags for each person. Let your group know that the first 15-20 are DESIGNED to hang out and get to know each other. So they don't wonder why you are not "starting on time" – you are!
- **35 minutes: Intro, teaching or Video**
Introduce the topic, hand out blanks (if you have any) and then show the video or begin the activity.
- **35 minutes: Discussion**
Lead the group through an honest discussion using questions below.
- **5 minutes: Prayer**
At the end of your time, ask for prayer requests, and have several people pray. You might be wise to write these down and send a follow up email during the week as another opportunity to "touch" you group members.

WEEKLY REMINDERS

- Pray! Pray for each person by name and ask God to speak to their hearts!
- At the end of the meeting, have people fill out the Treat Schedule (in "Extras" on our website).
- **IMPORTANT:** Make sure to end ON TIME. You can always tell people they are welcome to stay – but officially end the group on time and give those who need to leave the option to make an exit as soon as the class time expires. It is not honoring to your group to keep the group going after the ending time – even if you are having a "great discussion." They have babysitters to get home to, homework, dinner to cook, etc. Trust me on this – they will appreciate it!

Leading Effective Small Groups

TWENTY PRACTICAL TIPS

1. Start and end on time. Starting on time will establish a practice of people coming on time. Timeliness on both ends shows respect for people.

2. Make sure the room set-up is such that everyone can see everyone else. In most homes, this will be a limiting factor as to the number of people in the small group. Having people sit on a stairway or in an alcove usually inhibits them from participating.

3. Design the room set-up and rules of engagement so that there is a minimum of distraction. Have a policy regarding phone calls and childcare so that these and other issues will not be disruptive for others.

4. If your group is young in the faith, consider having multiple copies of the same translation of the Bible. This is also wise if you have internationals. Your chaplain may be able to help you obtain these copies for a very reasonable price. This also allows you to refer to passages by page number for those not familiar with the Bible. If you have more mature believers, you as the leader might want to provide additional translations if you found those translations to be helpful in your study.

5. Avoid praying or reading around in a circle. While most of our target audience is comfortable reading, there are exceptions. The same goes for praying. Take volunteers for these tasks rather than risk losing someone because they felt pressure to read or pray. If you detect an unplanned pattern of going from person to person, jump in and break the pattern.

6. Include a short review of previous weeks if the flow of thought is important. With the increased frequency of TDY/TAD and deployed assignments, help those who were absent feel part of the group.

7. Start with easy questions. This serves the purpose of getting people talking. Observation questions - What does it say? - are a natural way to do this. You might even employ a "hook" - an observation/question about life in general - which most everyone can identify with to open your discussion if doing so sets the stage for the direction you want the study to take. (For instance, if your theme is going to be "God's Discipline" you might ask people if they have heard the phrase "tough love" and if so, what they understand it to mean.)

8. Seek to involve everyone in the interaction. If one or two people are monopolizing the responses, you will need to stop this. Rather than specifically calling on a person, generically ask for responses by those who have not had a chance to say anything. If this practice continues week after week, you should plan to approach the offending party and let them know you appreciate their participation but ask them to be sensitive to your goal of involving others.

9. Don't call on specific people to respond - unless you can tell they want to talk. While you may be confident that some people wouldn't mind you specifically asking them, others might be apprehensive that you could do the same to them. Be wise here.

10. Don't let all the questions and response come to you, the leader. If you see this pattern developing, ask others to respond to a response. Keep this up until the conversation flow naturally is multi-directional.

11. Don't allow yourself to become the group guru. As appropriate, you may need to encourage people out of their comfort zones to take leadership. Co-lead a study with a new leader or meet with him or her mid-week to answer questions and be a resource. Look for ways to affirm them after the study. Likewise, don't allow people to view participating Chaplains as the guru. They will appreciate it.

12. Don't accept a wrong answer for fear of offending. If there is a wrong response, you can ask the person to state the verse or phrase that prompted their response. (By the way, this is a good practice even if the response is correct.) You can also ask others if they agree or if they understand it differently. If a person often gives a wrong answer and you need to have it corrected, look for an opportunity to affirm them when they give a correct answer.

13. Don't allow statements that denigrate another denomination. The study is intended to be a Bible Study, not a justification of one church doctrine over another. There may be a few exceptions if having a variety of responses enhances your purpose. Be careful, however, to insure that this technique will not offend anyone. If the truth is to offend, let that truth come directly from the Scriptures.

14. Be alert to the use of Christian/church-ese. It doesn't take long for people to invent or use a word or phrase that becomes an "in" expression. Newcomers may feel lost; old-timers may need to wrestle with the concept afresh. When appropriate, ask for basic definitions so that everyone is at the same place in their understanding of the term.

15. Stick with the text being studied. Almost every passage should have its understanding incorporated in the immediate context. Usually the recipients of one of the Apostle Paul's letters/epistles were not required to have read a previous letter as a prerequisite for understanding the current letter. When, in your personal study, you found a cross-reference to be helpful use it carefully.

If you want everyone to see that passage, make a statement and direct people there together. If you observe some mature believers seeking to impress others with their knowledge of other Scriptures, request that they stay with the passage under consideration. The discipline will prove beneficial for everyone. The correlation and expanded development of a concept with other texts can be important. When that is the case, the leader should come prepared to include everyone and "level the playing field" by have text strips prepared ahead of time so that everyone considers them as "the text."

16. Draw the study to a conclusion. End on time - otherwise you will be frustrating some and not keeping your word. Additionally, don't quit without some sort of summation. Usually this is best accomplished before heading into the application phase. Discovering a bunch of interesting facts does not constitute a good study. Tell people they can hang around after the meeting if they still have questions.

17. Don't forget to do "application praying". This helps draw the study to a proper conclusion. Don't be troubled if it takes a few weeks to get everyone in the pattern of doing this.

18. If you serve refreshments after the small group meeting, avoid the practice of "can you top this?" Save the real special treats for a special event. Sometimes, however, the bringing of dessert is the only way a person/couple can be involved. Don't discourage them.

19. Structure the small group so that you encourage growth/the incorporation of new people. Have natural entry points if the topic is lengthy and will involve a number of weeks. Make sure newcomers feel welcome, even if it means discontinuing your conversations with close friends. A word of explanation to them should be sufficient and will likely encourage them to branch out. Look for ways to involve them in the group early on, such as inquiring if they would want to open their home for a study or bring refreshments.

20. As you grow, plan to multiply the study. This needs to be understood from the start so that you do not meet with resistance when the time comes. Let this be a "vision-driven" goal from the very beginning.

Adapted from <http://ocf.gospelcom.net/pubs/practica.php>