



Small Group Leadership:

Understanding Group Dynamics

iFOLLOW

Working with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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Small Group Leadership: Understanding Group Dynamics

This presentation is designed for people who desire to serve Jesus Christ and help lead others to Him.

Learning Objectives

1. How to define group dynamics
2. Understand some key concepts of group dynamics
3. Know the Biblical foundation for these concepts
4. Learn how to form more cohesive, effective small groups
5. Learn how to understand the dynamics within a small group you lead
6. Define “effective” in regards to small groups in churches

Content Outline

1. An overview of the term “group dynamics”
2. Some key concepts of group dynamics
 - A. Tuckman’s forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning/mourning
 - B. Peck’s pseudocommunity, chaos, emptiness, true community
3. One way to distill the major theories for church
 - A. Small Talk
 - B. Cross Talk
 - C. Deep Talk
 - D. Soul Walk
 - E. Walk On
4. Conclusion: Back to the beginning

Background Material for the Presenter

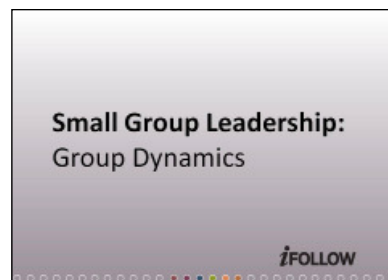
No human being could begin to peer into the inner workings of what we call the Trinity or Triune God. We can barely grasp the concept that there **is** one God in three personalities. However, it seems safe to say that God works, and created people to work, in groups. From the very beginning (in which the three Persons of the God-head are specifically mentioned, if one links Genesis 1

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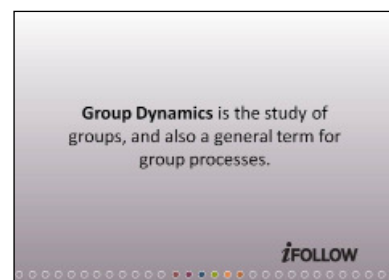
with John 1), God said it was “not good” for human beings to be alone. Central to the very first blessings bestowed on the new human race were marriage and parenting, thus establishing the most basic and foundational of human groupings—husband and wife, parent and child—the family. It could even be argued that harmony in the garden depended on the willingness of Adam and Eve to trust their “group,” defined as God, the angels and each other, and that sin entered because a divisive outside influence succeeded first in dividing the human pairing and then in conquering their trust in their one and only group leader.

From that day to this, humans have formed, divided, multiplied, and torn apart groups small and large, as rapidly as cells in any petri dish. And as early as the Flood and the subsequent Tower of Babel, people have tried to understand, manage, and control groups, whether for altruistic reasons such as Noah’s long attempt to convince his hearers to join the all-too-small group in the ark, or for personal power, such as Lamech’s multi-wife family (Genesis 4:23) or the tower-builders’ project to reach heaven and “make a name for [them]selves” (11:4). It was that latter event which prompted God to “scatter them abroad” (11:8) so that they would form smaller clusters of families and tongues, with some chance of learning the meaning and depth of true community. An almost immediate side effect was the development of the Us vs. Them mentality. Even the biblical genealogies are attempts to document to which group (family or clan) any given person belonged.

At least as early as Plato, humans have tried to classify and define groups and their behavior, and to imagine what a perfect group (or city or republic) would look like. Since the dawn of the Scientific Age, we’ve become ever more clinical and precise in our attempt to pick apart and examine everything from dust mites to our own bodies, minds, and even spirits. Which brings us to the Information Age and the approximately 12.2 million listings that come up (as of today) on Google for the term “group dynamics.”

Wikipedia, that ubiquitous repository of all knowledge, has this definition of the term: “**Group dynamics** is the study of groups, and also a general term for group processes. Relevant to the fields of psychology, sociology, and communication studies, a group is two or more individuals who are connected to each other by social relationships. Because they interact and influence each other, groups develop a number of dynamic processes that separate them from a random collection of individuals. These processes include norms, roles, relations, development, need to belong, social influence, and effects on behavior. The field of group dynamics is primarily concerned with small group behavior.”

The article then outlines some of the major contributions to the study of this field. They vary from studies of very large people groups such as ethnic groups, and how they act with each other and with those they perceive



as “other,” to studies of groups as small as two people and how they can impact each other’s lives.

For our purposes, we will concentrate on small groups, defined as groups of between four and fifteen people. Most experienced small group leaders consider eight to twelve to be ideal, often citing Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples to be His personal trainees, who would learn to be group leaders in their turn. The group they founded grew exponentially and became the *ekklesia*, the “called-out ones,” from a term first used of popular assemblies such as the one in Athens—groups like our congresses or parliaments, who are called to serve the larger group. (*ecclesia*. (n.d.). Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Retrieved January 23, 2009, from Dictionary.com Website)

Key Concepts of Group Dynamics

The basic understanding of small group dynamics is rooted in the small size of a group of this type. Most researchers agree that a group of about a dozen adults (including late adolescents 16 years of age and older) is optimal, although the same reality applies to somewhat smaller and larger groups. This is because it is what is called a “primary” group, meaning that everyone in the group can know each of the others personally and have a direct, one-on-one relationship in the context of the group. Larger groups become too large for everyone to know and have a personal relationship with each of the others. In the church, as a group moves from 25 to 50 members and beyond, it begins to rely on a leader or leaders to be the glue that maintains the group. Congregations where the average group size each week is greater than 50 expect their pastor to carry information between the individual members and keep them together.

The Bible context is interesting on this basic fact. When Christ selected disciples, He picked 12 to be His inner circle despite the fact that there was a larger number of 70 or more among His most dedicated followers, finally totaling 120 when they waited for the Holy Spirit in the upper room after the resurrection and ascension. (Mark 3:14; Luke 10:1, 17; Acts 1:15)

The fact that a small group is “primary” or face to face in its relationships determines much of what happens in the group and why it happens as it does. This is one of its fundamental strengths. Because it is small the members are able to develop a level of trust and comfort, close friendships with the others. This enables them to be more open and honest in their communication, to behave informally and without pretense. In this atmosphere learning, growing, healing and change can occur. It is also possible for relationships to become tangled and unhealthy. An understanding of group dynamics will help the group leader to guide the group toward a healthy relationship and away from the negative possibilities.

At least the first few pages of those 12 million items listed on Google overwhelmingly cite one man, Bruce Tuckman. He was certainly not the first to come up with patterns

of group behavior and something called the “natural lifespan” of a group, but in 1965 he put the principles he found into rhyming form, and the biggest group we know—humans in general—love to use rhyme for remembering things. So now no article or definition of group theory is complete without Tuckman’s “forming, storming, norming, and performing.” A brief description follows:



Forming—The beginning stage of a group, in which people stick to safe social conventions and politeness as they tentatively explore the others in the group, what their own role will be, and what the group’s purpose is.

Storming—A period of confusion as members of the group begin to feel safe enough to disagree, air conflicts over leadership and purpose, etc.

Norming—As the group members develop relationships and trust, they begin to find ways to work together, and form rules (often unspoken and not consciously recognized) for the life of the group.

Performing—The mature and effective group will work together as a team, highly productive and successful at their purpose, and feeling comfortable and trusting of each other. Some groups never reach this point.

Adjourning/Mourning—More recently Tuckman added a fifth stage, which he calls Adjourning, though others also call it Mourning or De-forming. In many cases a group was formed for a particular purpose and comes to a natural end when the job is done. Typically the members may feel sad, disoriented, even lost. A celebration of what the group has accomplished and expression of the sadness is appropriate, helpful, and healthful. It is not uncommon for small groups in church life to function for a year or several years and then come to a natural end as key leaders move away or move on to other ministries.

Another popular set of stages for group life was developed by M. Scott Peck. His list, delineated in detail in *The Different Drum*, is similar to Tuckman’s, but differs in important ways. One of the most important differences is that his model relates to much larger groups, workshops of 50 to 160 people or even more. Dr. Peck’s stages of community building are as follows:



Pseudocommunity—The beginning stage, with most members in polite mode, some shyer than others, attempting to get to know others in the group.

Chaos—This is the stage where true feelings begin to emerge from the polite talk, often expressed in accusatory,

even attacking ways. The group looks as if it will break down completely.

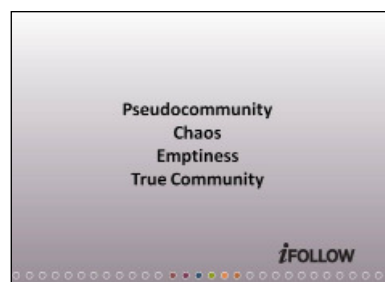
Emptiness—Unique, so far as I am aware, to Dr. Peck, this stage is a time of individuals looking within to discover what things stand in the way of their being in community with their own souls, and emptying them out. They may tell stories of great pain or deep feeling, and the group begins to listen compassionately, without judging.

True Community—The group becomes a true communion. Faces are softer, eyes more trusting. They can tell the truth to each other and themselves without harming anyone.

Another major difference between this system and Tuckman's is that the workshop group has no other goal than to create community. It may be made up of a group of people who already work together, perhaps professionally, or have other goals in "real life," and the group has problems, or just wishes to develop deeper community and trust. They come together for one to three days to do a Community-Building Workshop, and once that time is over, they can go back home or back to work, with new, stronger relationships and deeper, truer connections, which enable them to work more effectively in whatever their other tasks may be.

These or any "stages" of group life might more properly be called processes. It is very important to understand that nothing in human life is linear and neat, no matter how much our scientifically-biased minds might wish it were. In physical life, there are periods of fast growth, periods of slow growth, periods of chaos (often just before a new leap of growth), and in adulthood, a new kind of growth. We members of modern, "developed" societies (some of the largest recognized people groups) tend to believe fervently that if we're not growing we're dying. So our business, our church, our income—all these things—should be getting bigger and bigger, right? What if our bodies grew that way? In fact, mature growth is a whole different creature. We continue to grow in knowledge, in spirit, in depth, but we certainly hope we don't continue to grow in size! And we still—in fact, sometimes more than ever—find ourselves in periods of chaos, where it seems nothing is being accomplished and we're about to break down entirely. But we learn that if we push right through the chaos, there is new strength and wisdom on the other side.

So groups will cycle back and forth into and out of any of these stages. A new member will come in, shy and tentative and polite, or dominant and overbearing, then catapult the group back into chaos by trying to figure out, or change, the function of the group and her place in it. A task will end, and there will be argument over what the next task should be, or whether the group even still has a purpose, or should close. There will be new needs for emptying every time someone discovers another obstacle to depth in his own heart. An experienced group leader, with knowledge of these group processes, will not be unduly dismayed by them, and will be able to facilitate the group's healthy movement into and through new processes to ever deeper trust and community.

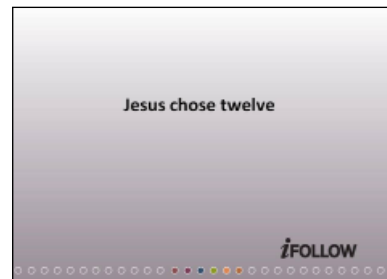


Biblical Models

Many questions inject themselves into the mind of a Christian group leader or would-be group leader. Are these so-called “group dynamics” really universal and necessary, or are they a construct of our scientific age and obsessive desire to codify everything? Do Bible study groups, mission groups, even prayer groups go through these stages and processes? If the Holy Spirit is in control, wouldn’t things proceed on a more even keel? Wouldn’t people get along from the beginning? Shouldn’t we be able to trust each other completely just because we’re Christians?

The word “group” isn’t even in most Bibles, let alone “group dynamics” or “group theory.” Not even Solomon has anything specific to say about the interactions within a group. How does one go about looking for these principles?

Biblical groups do come to mind. Aside from patriarchal families, in which these group stages would be difficult to find, the earliest one we know very much about is probably the Children of Israel. The principles we’ve seen do emerge, in a sketchy fashion. They are eager to leave with Moses, apparently certain that life will be wonderful now that they are free. They know how to form tribes and clans, and organize with apparent willingness for their marches and camps. But they haven’t gone far before there is commotion and outrage, and they begin to “grumble against” Moses, challenging his leadership, his styles, his wisdom, even his guidance from God. And the cyclical nature of the process is clear—for the next forty years they move from willing participation in the life of the group to chaos and challenge, and back again. But like many groups, the larger nation, at least, never seems to arrive at the point of “performing,” or “true community,” at least not in the way God had planned Israel to be a light to the nations. (Isaiah 42:6; 58:8, 10; 60:1-3)



Another group that comes to mind, much more similar to what we are looking for, is the twelve apostles. The gospels make it clear that Jesus was followed by hordes of people, and that dozens, perhaps even hundreds, were close enough and regular enough to be called followers, or disciples. (1 Corinthians 15:6, Acts 1:15)

However, Jesus, after much prayer, chose twelve by name to be His specific trainees, and left the official leadership of His mission in their hands when He left this earth. We know nothing about how any of the disciples acted or talked when they first met each other, but it seems reasonable to assume that, like any human, they began with polite surface conversation. We do know, and have records of some of the chaos or “cross talk” that occurred among them.

We don't know in what ways Jesus' disciples might have shared their deeper stories as they got to know each other, but it is obvious, since we have the stories today, that Peter did tell about his betrayal of Jesus in Caiaphas' courtyard and how he felt when Jesus met his eyes; that John did tell of being at the foot of the cross and receiving the charge of caring for Jesus' mother; that Peter, James, and John eventually told the story of the transfiguration. Sharing these stories and deep feelings would have led to closer fellowship and trust.

And finally, we have the record of the 120 men and women in the upper room when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. Acts 2:1 says these people were "all of one accord." We can only speculate what kind of sharing, of praying together, perhaps crying together brought about this deep communion, but we know what the result was. In one day this small group exploded into a church of over 3,000, and in one generation, they took the gospel of Jesus Christ to their known world.

How? "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:46-47) They may have worshiped in crowds at the temple, but they likely couldn't have crowded more than two dozen people into even the richest homes. The Early Church grew both inwardly and outwardly in small groups.

And, by the way, continued to cycle from true community through chaos and confusion, and back again. See Acts 6 for a description of the some ethnic difficulties which arose and the solutions found, or Chapter 15 for a description of the Jerusalem Council which settled some divisive issues between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Yet we cannot find these stages of group dynamics recorded in any sequential way we would recognize. People in earlier times didn't examine, research, and organize information in the ways we do today. If we are to find wisdom and counsel in the Bible, we must search in a different way; "dig for them as the miner digs for the treasure hidden in the earth," as Ellen White puts it. (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 111)

Christian Small Groups

In researching today's most common theories, two things emerge. One is that there is rarely recognition of another spirit, whether good or evil, interacting in the group. All responsibility and power rests in the human group members. This falls short of the depth of understanding necessary to lead a small group in a church or spiritual setting. As Christians, we know that there are two dramatically different spirits abroad in the earth, and both have a vested interest in the success or failure of human community.

God intended the universe to be one Communion; Creator and Creation united in a love

we can only faintly imagine now. The devil and the evil beings who follow him succeeded in breaking that communion and are still bending every energy to disrupt and distort communication both between human and God and between human and human. The Holy Spirit and the faithful angels, meanwhile, have the resources of all of heaven on their side in the vital work of rebuilding a family of God that can never be broken again. Christian group leaders must be intentional about seeking the power of the Holy Spirit in every meeting of every group.

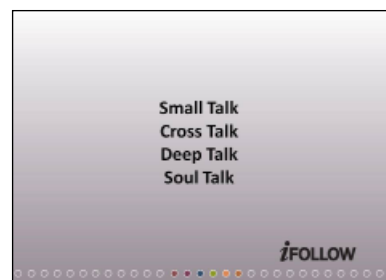
The second fact that emerges is that most models agree on a four-stage pattern, with a fifth that is sometimes considered more of a footnote than a real phase of group life. The four stages are similar in some ways, different in others, and again, some are of more use than others in understanding the kind of community described in the Bible. Perhaps, then, one way of distilling the basic principles of group dynamics into a more specific form for church cell groups would be to coin our own terms and pick and choose what is helpful from other peoples' studies. We might call our stages Small Talk, Cross Talk, Deep Talk, and Soul Walk.

Let's look a little closer at each of these processes, and then see what we can find in God's Word about each.

Stage 1: Small Talk

Though this stage is often characterized as “pseudo” or “pretend,” there is not necessarily anything negative or phony about the conventional ways people come together to meet and get to know each other. Small talk, politeness, the conventional questions we ask; these do not have to be pretense, but may be based on Christian principles of courtesy, kindness, and an open-hearted way of listening to and learning about each other.

The questions may be nearly universal—who are you, what do you do, where do you live, how long have you lived there, have you ever visited the Acme Museum, do you know my friend, Jane? What makes the difference between mere chitchat and true friendliness is attitude. Simply, **do I really care?** Does it matter to me who this is, where she works or lives, and what she thinks of the Acme Museum? I had better not even bring it up unless I like it myself and hope it may be an actual point of common interest. I won't use the question of work merely as an opportunity to bring up my own recent promotion, or ask who she knows because I want to know if she's part of the In Crowd.



By definition, small talk is a beginning level, the shallow waters. Today, the use of the term “shallow” often connotes falsity and insecurity. But where is it that we enter the ocean? At the beach. We begin in shallow waters, and if we’re wise, we do not progress further until we gain the skills to safely do so. Also, just as the rule, “Never swim alone” is common knowledge, so we obviously cannot move into deeper spiritual community alone. There has to be someone to commune with. We can’t even gain deeper communion with our own souls without the company of God, the Holy Spirit. Neither can we gain closer communion with the friends who travel with us on our journey of faith without His presence.



In a Christian small group, our goal is to see each person as a child of the Creator of the universe, and uniquely important. That makes even our small talk important.

What does God’s Word say? The term “small talk” is not found in the Bible. However, a concordance search of *kindness* and *words* is instructive. Proverbs, in particular, has some good counsel on kindness. “Do not let *kindness* and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart,” Proverbs 3:3. Proverbs 19:22 says that “What is desirable in a man is his kindness,” and 31:26 describes the ideal woman as one who “opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”

Here are some good measures of our small talk: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it wise? Will it be “sweet to the soul and healing to the bones,” as Proverbs 12:18 says pleasant words can be? Surely Jesus’ brother, James, speaks truly when he says in James 3:2, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”

But the power of kindness goes far beyond mere good or friendly feeling. Job 6:14 gives us, “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty.” For a despairing person (who might well be at your group meeting), the face of God may seem dark and distant, unless he can see that Face in the face of his friend.

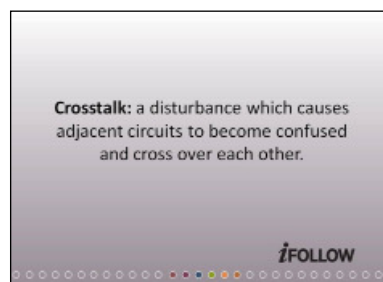
Possibly one of our common mistakes is simply chattering too much, without really saying anything. Solomon found several good antidotes to this. In Proverbs 10:19 it is written, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.” Similarly in Proverbs 16:24 it says, “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” And Proverbs 15:2 states, “The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly.”

Stage 2: Cross Talk

The term cross talk was originally a technical one. According to an encyclopedia, it is defined as “a disturbance, caused by electromagnetic interference, along a circuit or a

cable pair. A telecommunication signal disrupts a signal in an adjacent circuit and can cause the signals to become confused and cross over each other.” This is a pretty good analogy of what happens when “adjacent” humans get mixed up with each other, and the term has been used in therapy groups and in many AA-style support groups to mean “people speaking out of turn, interrupting someone while they are speaking or giving direct advice to someone in a meeting.” (from anonpress.org) “Cross” is also an ancient way of describing irritated feelings and words. And sometimes, with the best of intentions and no hard feelings involved, people who think they know what the other means may be “talking at cross purposes,” because they misunderstand some word or attitude.

If we are honest, most of us must admit that the shallow waters of early acquaintance are comfortable, and we often prefer staying there. Shallow waters are calm, undemanding, and safe. Unfortunately, many small groups, Sabbath school classes, even whole churches never venture out into deeper waters, or try, but don’t get far. The reasons are simple. First, there is, as we have observed, an evil spirit whose intention is to cross the wires as soon and as often as possible, and keep them that way. Satan isn’t very threatened by a small group that never leaves the shallow waters of small talk. (And yes, it’s possible to discuss Bible topics, Sabbath school lessons, and prayer requests without ever leaving the kiddie beach.)



Secondly, as soon as people begin to talk about more important things, things that are held close to their souls, unnerving feelings may rear their heads. People become afraid and insecure. **What if they really knew the inside me? Would they still like me? Would they even think I was a true Christian?** Some respond to these fears with nervousness and defensiveness. Some jockey for position and authority, seeking to reassure themselves by pushing others down and themselves up. Still others withdraw, or try to control the situation by hastily changing subjects, hushing discord, maintaining calm at all costs.

If a group of people are trying to actually work together and accomplish some task or mission, the situation quickly becomes even murkier. **What are we trying to do? How will we do it? Who is in charge? Who will do what?** If these questions are asked in words, they are easier to come to consensus on, but most likely the real questions become submerged in cross talk by any definition, as dominant, submissive, or fearful personalities act out in all the above ways.

The group is in chaos! God is a God of order, not of chaos, so this cannot be a good thing, can it? The group leader, of course, is also a human being, and without training and experience, may try to save the group by any of the above methods, depending on his or her own personality traits.

It is true that if the cross talk and confusion is allowed to simply grow without interfer-

ence or redirection, the group may fall apart and cease to exist. Some may even leave the church or their faith entirely. No one wants this to happen, so one possible (and common) outcome is that the group will retreat into calm waters, discuss only subjects on which they agree, and wonder why they never seem to accomplish much, let alone grow. Privately, they also wonder why they feel so unfulfilled, and may decide this whole small group experiment isn't what it's cracked up to be.

There is a third way. It is possible to bring order *out of* the chaos, to find a path by walking straight through rather than trying to go around, go under, or turn back. Interestingly this is what God invariably, from Genesis to Revelation, chooses to do. Genesis 1 tells us God first made a formless, empty planet, before creating our biosphere on it. We have already mentioned the stories of the Flood and the Tower of Babel. In these stories God actually brings the chaos, for good reasons of His own. Look at the messy patriarchal family situations in which He chose to show His grace. Many Old Testament prophets relay God's promise to turn deserts into well watered, productive gardens (Isaiah 35:6, 55:13) and it is clear that He also chooses to create beautiful soul gardens in the thorniest, swampiest heart jungles. (Isaiah 41:18-20; 55:12, 13; John 4:13, 14)

Jeremiah and Daniel make it clear that God chose to use the instrument of Babylon to accomplish His purposes, and foretold the violent march of conquest after conquest throughout earth's history—not because that's the way He wanted it, but certainly to show that He could still fulfill His plans and His will even in the chaos of sinful human history. That continues to clearly be the case through early church history and right through Revelation, to the end of the age.

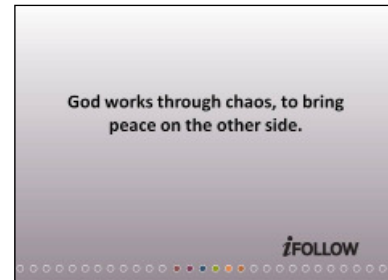
This same God is present in our struggling study, prayer, and mission groups, and is equally able to bring peace to our cross talk and confusion, if only we face it resolutely and remember one essential thing; if you have to walk through a storm, it's best to hold hands!

Even when airing differences and questions, it's still good to ask, **Is it kind? Is it true? Is it wise?** The hard part is remembering kind doesn't mean namby-pamby or mealy-mouthed, true does not mean aggressive or judgmental, and wise; that's the crux of the matter! There's only one place wisdom comes from, and wise group leaders, and members, too, will be praying hard during these situations.

What does God's Word say? The ultimate example of facing and taming chaos is Jesus. Let's look at some case studies in which He confronted difficult situations and see what He did and didn't do.

First we'll look at a story in which Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of the chief of demons, Beelzebub, or Satan. This story is recorded in Matthew 12:22-30 and in Luke 11:14-23. This is a very interesting story, given the fact that we usually talk about Jesus' meekness and willingness to let criticism roll off his back. He was quite direct in this instance. What did He do and say? What were the results?

Next, let's look at some ways Jesus dealt with conflict among His own followers. He acted differently on different occasions. Compare, for instance, the story of disciples arguing over precedence in Jesus' kingdom, found in Mark 10:35-45, and the story of how Jesus dealt with Simon the Pharisee's criticism when Mary washed His feet, found in Luke 7:36-50.



For an even more extreme example of Jesus choosing to do things very differently, compare the stories of the two temple cleansings with the stories of His trial. In the one instance, whether at the beginning or the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus was more than direct and straightforward. He was angrily confrontational, though we know His anger was righteous and not anything like the loss of temper one of us might have experienced. In the other, He was the "lamb before the shearers" (Isaiah 53:7), saying nothing, (Matt. 27:12; Mark 15:5; Luke 23:9; John 19:9) "suffering" (an archaic term for "allowing") whatever would happen, to happen.

As we have seen, chaos and cross talk even affected the life of the Son of God. Though He sometimes chose to respond with silence or by quietly withdrawing, He never avoided difficulties from fear or insecurity as we so often do. Though He sometimes chose to respond with direct confrontation, His anger was always from a heart of love, and He never rode roughshod over the feelings of others or thoughtlessly caused pain, as we so often do. God grant us the wisdom to respond wisely to every confusing circumstance, following in the footsteps of our Group Leader.

Stage 3: Deep Talk

Sometimes chaotic cross talk results from simple confusion. It may be easily resolved by careful discussion of the questions that are arising, such as "What is our purpose?" and "Whose job is it to do what?" If people are as willing to listen and truly hear each other as they are to air their own feelings and grievances, decisions will be made, things will quickly calm down, and order will reign.

More often, especially if cross talk is ongoing or acrimonious, the underlying source is fear, anger, or pain. It may come from one person or several, but one person's pain is enough to touch a fuse to the hidden or unhealed pain of others. Scary as the chaos may have been, this is where the truly hard work of community really begins. It's time to be quiet and listen.

A very useful tool of the Community Building Workshops pioneered by M. Scott Peck is the two-sided rule, "Don't speak until moved to speak. Speak when moved to speak." According to Jerry Hampton, producer of the extremely useful site, www.community4me.com, the first day or two of workshops are usually taken up just by people learning what it means to be "moved" to speak. It doesn't mean talk whenever you feel like it, and it

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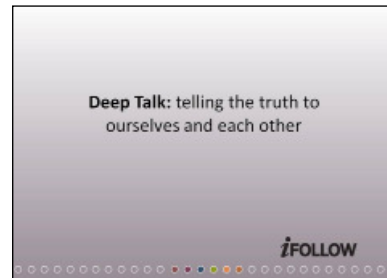
doesn't mean wait until you see a seraph with a hot coal (Isaiah 6:6) before you open your mouth.

Dr. Peck's belief is that all of us have, lodged in our souls, blockages to connection with our own deepest feelings and values. For a believer this would also be a blockage to full communion with God. How can we possibly create wholesome, loving, fearless community with each other if we cannot even find our way to our own emotional/spiritual core and to our Creator? What happens at a workshop of this kind is that eventually, often after periods of silence, some courageous soul begins to tell a story. It may be a sorrow the person is bearing. It may be something that hurt or angered him. It may even be a secret she has borne in silence and secrecy for years. Others lean forward and listen in respectful silence. The whole atmosphere of the room is changed. Christians know the Holy Spirit is present.

Others may begin to share their souls as well. This is, paradoxically, both the result and the cause of deep trust. Someone has to trust enough to start it. But it's only in trusting that trust is born and grows.

The group leader has an important task here. People who walk with God know how to listen and respect each other, and Christians who have been in prayer together may reach this point earlier than some other groups. They can then reach a peculiarly Christian crisis point. Far too many of us think Christianity is in the business of providing answers, rather than providing a safe place for us to explore our questions. It is extremely important that no one try to counsel or advise the person sharing the story. Even if another group member is certain he or she has the "right answer" to whatever question or hard spot the other faces, spouting it now will promptly land the group back in either cross talk or the safe shallows of small talk. Some habitual statements are not helpful at this moment. For example, "Just pray about it." Or, "I remember when I had a situation just like that, and I ..." Or, "God is great—all the time!" Sometimes silence is far more golden than the shiniest words.

The speaker does not want to be "fixed." He wants to be heard. He wants to be unburdened of a load he has carried alone too long. He wants to cry and not have to fear shame or ridicule. And when he has been heard, he is willing, even eager, to listen to another's own heart-felt secrets. It's as if, having emptied the soreness out of his heart, he now has space to hear and feel and really share hers. It is entirely amazing the kind of love that will bloom in a group that has learned to trust each other on this level.



What does God's Word say? When it comes to sharing deep secrets of the heart, the Bible has much to say, but again, we must be willing to dig a little. "Confess" is an interesting word to start with. In our modern society, to confess means to admit a wrongdoing or a fault. In fact, the Greek word translated "confess" in English Bibles is *homologeō*, from "same" and "talk or reason." According to *Strong's Concordance*, it means, "to **assent**, i.e. **covenant, acknowledge**: In the Bible, "confess," means something closer to **profess**. There are several texts, such as Romans 10:9, which speak of "confessing" Jesus. It is only when it is used in the direct context of sin, such as in James 5:16 or 1 John 1:9, that it is used to mean "admit to sin."

The Deep Talk stage of group life is nothing if not "talking the same" or assenting together about truth, both the truth that God **is** good all the time, and the truth that life hurts a lot sometimes.

This is the kind of deep talk that has been found to be healing in survivors' therapy or support groups of various kinds, and in the ongoing projects which allow Jewish holocaust survivors to tell their stories and be heard.

"Encourage" is another good word to search, as is "strengthen." There are many passages on holding each other up through the valleys.

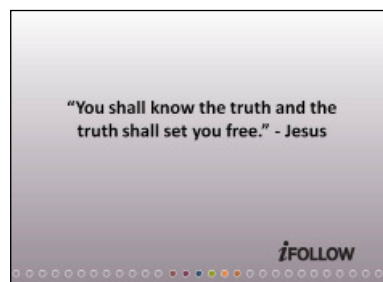
Stage 4: Soul Walk

Up to now, all our imagery has been about talking, and certainly much of the formal meeting time of a small group will be spent in talking, whether about a certain Bible passage under discussion, prayer joys and concerns, or the kind of Deep Talk discussed in the previous section. However, if a group is to be successful, eventually it must move from merely talking to actually walking together on the path to a higher life in God.

This is where every group is different from every other group. The group is now, in Dr. Peck's terms, a **true community** of people who care about and trust each other. There are universal, recognizable things about a true and loving community, but each will still look different from others, because each has different interests and values. God made us that way, and seems to like it!

In Tuckman's terms, the group can **perform** its mission skillfully and successfully, working together easily and well, but also knowing what to do about it when difficulties inevitably arise. But what will that mission be?

Is this a prayer group? Perhaps its mission is to spend two hours per week in prayer together, and maybe also "meet" at noon daily, not together, but around the throne of God. Or at 6 a.m! Its members might be



forever looking for new ways to express prayer in words, in poetry, in silence, in the arts, in walks in the woods and many other ways. If so, how do they know whether they are “successful” at their task? Must the prayers be “answered” on their predetermined terms? Or is it a success just to be praying together, in communion with God and the group?

Is it a Bible study group? One group’s mission may be to go verse by verse through Proverbs, looking for practical ways to grow their individual and corporate lives in God. Another group’s mission may be to study every instance of praise in the Bible, looking for ways to develop their gratitude quotient. Another may want to act out all of Jesus’ miracles and find new and personal meanings from them. How will these groups measure success? Finishing the book? Getting the right answers? Sharing their continually growing delight in God with their friends and neighbors?

Perhaps it is a mission group. When it meets to determine its mission statement, it cannot rest on, “Go ye into all the world.” Nobody, not even Paul, has ever been given that as an individual mission mandate. This small group’s mission may be to provide food and clothing to the families in one neighborhood. Another group’s mission may be to conduct an evangelism campaign in a certain town. Another group’s mission may be to run a church website, and still another group’s mission may be to start a day care center or a weekly Mom’s Night Out. The success of such ventures is much easier to measure, because these are tangible goals. On the other hand, if the first group only came up with enough food and clothing to help a few families in their first year, were they a failure?

In evaluating our successes, we must do our best to divest ourselves of the world’s measuring sticks, especially the extremes of the affluent, industrialized world, such as, “Bigger is Better.” It is almost a guarantee that one of the goals of every one of the suggested groups above was to grow their own membership. But small groups must stay small to maintain their depth and trust, so when they get much larger than twelve, they need to multiply into two groups. Well-educated group leaders have already been preparing for this, both by talking about it from the beginning and by choosing an assistant leader early on. This leader will be ready to take his or her own new group off on their own exciting adventure, and yep, they will start back at Small Talk and work their way all the way through the thorns and over the river and up the mountain! But the destination will be worth it.

Stage 5 - Walk On

When a group’s task is a finite or temporary one, such as “run a Vacation Bible School,” it is easy to know when the job is over. Until next time, anyway. Have a party! Join together to rejoice over the highlights, laugh together over the gaffes, cry over the loss you feel. Make plans for next time, if there is one.

Many if not most groups do not recognize the need for a celebration and farewell like this. It is particularly stressful in the case of a church or study group whose unconscious purpose was to just meet and study until Jesus comes. If the group (as is almost inevitable) begins to come apart and attendance dwindles, there is no sense that an objective

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has been accomplished, and members feel let down or betrayed because others have lost interest or even left in anger. The end of a group feels like failure.

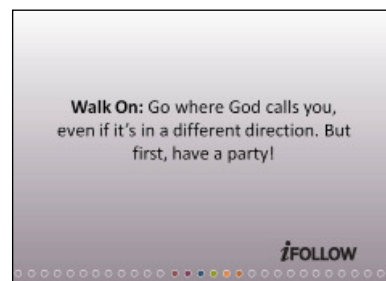
No group is going to last forever. It's a rare group that even meets for two years. The leader can help the group members to have a more realistic expectations by setting limits from the beginning. A group may covenant to meet for eight or ten or twelve weeks, or until they finish the gospel of John, or until thirteenth Sabbath. Then they have a special meeting in which they celebrate that time, mourn losses, and decide whether to disband, change, or start again next week or next month or when school starts, and again, covenant to meet for a finite time.

It is sometimes a good idea to allow new members only during the first couple of weeks of any new timeframe. This way, the trust built up among the group members will not be disrupted by a new presence, setting them back into Small Talk or Cross Talk just when they were getting well into Deep Talk. It also means it will be a new group, every time.

The truth is, a group will only become long-term if it has a visible, measurable mission. If it's a support group, it may go on indefinitely, but the membership will change. There are support groups for family caregivers, or cancer survivors, or 12 Step groups, for instance, which have run for years on end where there is consistent leadership, but the composition of the group changes as the cared-for family member dies, or the cancer-free survivor decides she has grown beyond the place where she needs the support of the group. The leader and members will have to decide whether a special good-bye is called for when one member leaves. Sometimes it will be, and sometimes not.

It is particularly important to realize that when a successful and beloved group grows to the point of "multiplying," it feels a lot more like dividing. It can be very painful even though it is a circumstance for which all have prayed and over which they are delighted, and a special farewell is called for. People will need to laugh and cry and complain and maybe even express anger that the group is "splitting up." Some congregations cannot bring themselves to grow successful cell groups for this very reason. They think they want to grow, they talk about growing, but they can't bear the thought of not being in the same group with John and Jill anymore. It feels like a death.

Let's face the truth which will set us free: In this world, it is a kind of death. But we will still be friends, we can still see each other, the two groups (and later four, and six, and ten) can even choose to meet together for a picnic every summer. And go to church together, to worship God corporately, every Sabbath! And in heaven, we'll be able to keep up with millions of friends all at once, and have enough time for them all. That's the ultimate goal! In the meantime, there will, inevitably, inescapably, come a time when we will have to Walk On.



What does God's Word say? The Bible is full of leavetakings. When Adam and Eve left the garden, a leavetaking that was definitely not in God's plan, He'd still planned for it. He still talked to them, and He set up an early system of sacrifices and promised to be with them and to ultimately deliver them. When the Israelites left Egypt, Miriam led in dancing and singing praise to God, but they still looked back on a fairly regular basis, longing for life the way they knew it, even though it had been a life of slavery! David and Jonathan could barely tear themselves apart, but they had to for David's life, and visited when they could. (1 Samuel 18:1-4; 20:41-42; 23:16-18) And when David faced the final leavetaking, learning that his best friend had died, he honored the occasion by writing one of his most beautiful songs. (2 Samuel 1:17-27)

However, as always, Jesus is our highest example. He shows us how to honor endings both during His ministry and at its end. In Mark 6:30-32, Jesus is welcoming His disciples back from their missionary journey without Him (which must have been, in itself, a stressful and unnerving leavetaking), and He honors their change in circumstances by calling them to go apart with Him and talk things over. They had things to celebrate, and no doubt things to mourn. But that was only the first hint of the lives they were going to have to learn to live without Him, or at least without His physical, visible presence.

Back to the Beginning

Acts tells the story of the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end. Luke shares his journal with us, unimaginable (to him) centuries in his future, and shows how little groups of praying people can and do change the world. To this day, every time two or three gather together in His name, the miracle begins again, and the church is born anew.

Handouts in this Package

1. Major Concepts of Group Dynamics
2. A New Way for Christian Small Groups to Define Stages

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Additional Resources

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Borchers, Tom (1999). "Small Group Development." Old Tappan, NJ: Pearson Higher Education. Available at: www.abacon.com/commstudies/groups/devgroup.html (This document includes additional models, not mentioned above.)

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Peck, M. Scott (1998). *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*. New York City: Simon and Schuster.

Video/DVD

Adams, Milton (2008). *Growth Groups*, Silver Spring, MD: NAD Church Resource Center. Video Available as Pastor's DVD Vol. 13. Distributed by www.adventsource.org

Websites

Chimaera Consulting, Ltd., is a major training organization for business corporations in the United Kingdom and worldwide. It maintains a website for its clients and includes a significant section of free information for the public with many basic concepts from group dynamics: www.chimaeraconsulting.com/models.htm

Group Dynamics and Community Building is a website developed by Jerry Hampton, a Christian who has a secular business as a trainer and consultant for business corporations and nonprofit organizations, Hampton and Associates, based in Arlington, Texas. It includes 88 resource articles on group dynamics, communication, small groups, etc.: www.community4me.com

Discussion Questions

1. What have you learned from this discussion of group dynamics? Are there things you will do differently or look at differently?
2. Why is it important to understand group dynamics?
3. Can you think of a time when a group you belonged to floundered because of misunderstandings of the dynamics of group life?

Chaos and Cross Talk

4. If someone accused you of using the power of the devil (as they did Jesus), what would be your first reaction?
5. Have you ever been accused unfairly? What did you do? What was the result?
6. What did Jesus do and say? What kinds of attitudes can you read into His words and actions? What was the result?
7. What can we distill from watching Jesus handle different people in different crises?

Endings and Closure

8. Tell about some farewell times that have blessed you.
9. In Acts 1 and 2 the earthly ministry of Jesus comes to an end and the infant church has it's beginnings: How did the endings help to prepare the group for the new beginnings?

Group Activities

Activity 1

Small Talk

Purpose: To find Biblical principles that will help small groups just forming.

Preparation: You will need room for pairs or small teams to work together, and enough concordances for each team to have one. Each person should have a Bible and writing materials.

Assignment: Have people spend some time looking up the words **word, tongue, and lips** to see what principles they can find that will be helpful in small groups, especially ones that are just forming, or in the early stages of learning to know each other. There are also good pointers to be gleaned from the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:21, 22 and in much of Colossians 3.

Debrief: Share the main ideas with the whole group on a white board or flip chart.

Time: Allow 10-15 minutes for looking up principles, and another 15-20 for sharing.

Activity 2

Small Talk

Purpose: To gain some insight on where on the “small talk” continuum each one is now.

Preparation: Bibles must be available. Have a long piece of tablecloth paper with markers, laid out on a long table, or fastened to a long wall, or even on the floor.

Assignment: Have someone read James 1:19. Using the phrase, “everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak,” have the group create a continuum on the paper, from one extreme to the other. Then choose pairs of people to act out the various points on the continuum, from all speaking and no listening to all listening and no speaking. Individuals who are willing may share where on this continuum they tend to live, and what the advantages and disadvantages of their position are.

Time: Allow a few minutes for the creation of the continuum, then one to two minutes for each pair to act out. Allow another 15-20 minutes for discussion of insights and reactions.

Activity 3

Cross Talk

Purpose: To discover new insights into Jesus' response to chaos or what we are calling "cross talk."

Preparation: Have Bibles available and space for the group to divide into two smaller circles.

Assignment: Divide the group in two smaller circles and separate them by as much space as you have so they can discuss without hearing any more than necessary of the other group's discussion.

1. Give one group the passages concerning Jesus' temple cleansings: Matthew 21; Mark 11; and John 2. Assign them the task of studying these passages specifically to learn how Jesus reacted to the chaos He found in the temple, and choosing one to three individuals to play out, with the proper emotion, what He said and did.
2. Give the second group the passages concerning Jesus' trial: Matt. 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19. Again, assign them the task of studying these passages specifically to learn how Jesus reacted to the chaos with which He was confronted, and choosing one to three individuals to play out, with the proper emotion, what He said and did.
3. After 20 minutes, bring the whole group back together, and let each perform its role play for the other.

Time: Allow 20 minutes for the smaller groups to study and plan, then 10 minutes or so for the playing out of each situation. Then allow 20 to 30 for overall discussion and reaction. You could use the following discussion questions: What caused Jesus to behave in such radically differing ways? Would there ever be a justification for these types of action to occur in a small group setting? Why or why not? Can you find other examples of Jesus choosing confrontation or choosing silence or even withdrawal from a situation? How is a Christian to know which attitude to adopt when?

Activity 4

Deep Talk, Soul Walk

Purpose: To better understand and begin to practice the kind of deep sharing a small group needs.

Preparation: Have Bibles, concordances, and writing materials ready. It would be good to have a table to work at. Write the following texts on the board or flipchart: Isaiah 53:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14; Hebrews 3:13.

Assignment: If the group is 12 or fewer, do this activity together. Otherwise, break out into smaller groups. Beginning with the texts supplied, and then looking up “encourage,” “confess,” and “strengthen,” find other words and passages germane to listening to, up-lifting, and upholding each other. Take notes on what comes up.

Debrief: Have a session of fervent prayer. Then, aside from sharing reactions to these discoveries, this might be a good time to see if there is anything anyone wants to share, since a class on leading small groups, at some point should begin to practice being one. Don’t push it if people are not ready. Sometimes a leader can set the example, too. Discuss how this kind of sharing can help the group as it takes up the Soul Walk to which God is calling it.

Time: Allow 15 to 20 minutes for Bible search and note-taking, and a half hour or more for prayer and sharing.

Activity 5

Walk On

Purpose: To encourage the attitude that endings are not always bad, and to find ways of making them more meaningful.

Preparation: On the board or flipchart, write:

1. Before His trial, as His time as Rabbi ended
2. At the cross and before His death, as His human life ended
3. The time between His resurrection and His ascension, as His ministry on earth came to an end

Assignment: Divide the group into three teams, one of which will take each of the three categories of leavetakings. Using the final chapters of all four gospels, have each group find all the ways they can in which Jesus honored and made His last times together with His disciples special. (John is by far more detailed.) You may use the following questions if you wish: What kinds of things did Jesus do to prepare His friends for these difficult times? What evidence can you find for their struggles against the inevitable? Were there any actual ceremonies, gatherings, or rituals, to make it easier? Do you think it did make it easier?

Handout 1

Major Concepts of Group Dynamics

Groups of about 12 people or less are called “small groups” and operate informally and at a personal level of relationships.

Bruce Tuckman

Forming: The beginning stage of a group, in which people stick to safe social conventions and politeness as they tentatively explore the others in the group, what their own role will be, and what the group’s purpose is.

Storming: A period of confusion as members of the group begin to feel safe enough to disagree, air conflicts over leadership and purpose, etc.

Norming: As the group members develop relationships and trust, they begin to find ways to work together, and form rules (often unspoken and not consciously recognized) for the life of the group.

Performing: The mature and effective group will work together as a team, highly productive and successful at their purpose, and feeling comfortable and trusting of each other. Some groups never reach this point.

Adjourning/Mourning: Most groups have a particular purpose or mission, a job to do. The group comes to a natural end when the job is done, but members may feel sad, disoriented, even lost. A celebration of what the group has accomplished and expression of the sadness is appropriate, helpful, and healthful.

M. Scott Peck

Pseudocommunity: The beginning stage: Group members are usually in a polite mode, some shyer than others in attempting to get to know others in the group.

Chaos: This is the stage where true feelings begin to emerge from the polite talk, often expressed in accusatory, even attacking ways. The group looks as if it will break down completely.

Emptiness: A time of individuals’ looking within to discover what things stand in the way of their being in community with their own souls, and emptying them out. They may tell stories of great pain or deep feeling, and the group begins to listen compassionately, without judging.

True Community: The group becomes a true communion. Faces are softer, eyes more trusting. They can tell the truth to each other and themselves without harming anyone.

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Handout 2

A New Way for Christian Small Groups to Define Stages

Stage 1: Small Talk

Though this stage is often characterized as “pseudo” or “pretend,” there is not necessarily anything negative or phony about the conventional ways people come together to meet and get to know each other. Small talk, politeness, the conventional questions we ask - these do not have to be pretense, but may be based on Christian principles of courtesy, kindness, and an open-hearted way of listening to and learning about each other.

In a Christian small group, our goal is to see each person as a child of the Creator of the universe, and uniquely important. That makes even our small talk important.

Stage 2: Cross Talk

The term *cross talk* was originally a technical one, defined as “a disturbance, caused by electromagnetic interference, along a circuit or a cable pair. A telecommunication signal disrupts a signal in an adjacent circuit and can cause the signals to become confused and cross over each other.” This is a pretty good analogy of what happens when “adjacent” humans get mixed up with each other, and the term has been used in therapy groups and in many AA-style anonymous groups to mean “people speaking out of turn, interrupting someone while they are speaking or giving direct advice to someone in a meeting.” (from anonpress.org) “Cross” is also an ancient way of describing irritated feelings and words. And sometimes, with the best of intentions and no hard feelings involved, people who think they know what the other means may be “talking at cross purposes,” because they misunderstand some word or attitude.

Even when airing differences and questions, it’s still good to ask, **Is it kind? Is it true?**

Is it wise? The hard part is remembering kind doesn’t mean namby-pamby or mealy-mouthed, true doesn’t mean aggressive or judgmental, and wise—well, that’s the crux of the matter! There’s only one place wisdom comes from, and wise group leaders, and members, too, will be praying hard during these situations.

Stage 3: Deep Talk

Sometimes chaotic cross talk results from simple confusion. It may be easily resolved by careful discussion of the questions that are arising, such as What is our purpose, and Whose job is it to do what? If people are as willing to listen and truly hear each other as they are to air their own feelings and grievances, decisions will be made, things will quickly calm down, and order will reign.

More often, especially if cross talk is ongoing or acrimonious, the underlying source is fear, anger, or pain. It may come from one person or several, but one person’s pain is enough to touch a fuse to the hidden or unhealed pain of others. Scary as the chaos may have been, this is where the truly hard work of community really begins. It’s time to be quiet

and listen. The speaker does not want to be “fixed.” He wants to be heard. He wants to be unburdened of a load he has carried alone too long. He wants to cry and not have to fear shame or ridicule. And when he has been heard, he is willing, even eager, to listen to another’s own heart-felt secrets. It’s as if, having emptied the soreness out of his heart, he now has space to hear and feel and really share hers. It is entirely amazing the kind of love that will bloom in a group that has learned to trust each other on this level.

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Stage 5: Walk On

When a group’s task is a finite or temporary one, such as “run a Vacation Bible School,” it’s easy to know when the job is over. Until next time, anyway. Have a party! Join together to rejoice over the highlights, laugh together over the gaffes, cry over the loss you feel. Make plans for next time, if there is one.

No group is going to last forever. It’s a rare group that even meets for two years. The leader can help the group members to have a more realistic expectations by setting limits from the beginning. A group may covenant to meet for eight or ten or twelve weeks, or until they finish the gospel of John, or until thirteenth Sabbath. Then they have a special meeting in which they celebrate that time, mourn losses, and decide whether to disband, change, or start again next week or next month or when school starts, and again, covenant to meet for a finite time.

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