



Small Group Leadership:

Developing Agendas for Small Group Meetings

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: Developing Agendas for Small Group Meetings

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

Learning Objectives

1. Some of the functions that a small group fulfills in the life of a growing Christian
2. Different types of small groups
3. Common elements of small groups
4. How to create the agenda for a small group meeting
5. How and when does the group reevaluate and change the agenda?

Content Outline

1. Small groups grow us in ways nothing else can.
2. Seven categories of small group
 - A. Prayer
 - B. Study
 - C. Mission
 - D. Support
 - E. Lifestyle
 - F. Common interest
 - G. Arts groups
3. Evaluating and evolving the small group and its agenda

Background Material for the Presenter

Many units in the discipleship curriculum include materials about why small groups are so important to the Christian life. Humans were created by a God who uses a plural name, *Elohim*, but singular verbs; a God who is One, yet shows the faces of a Parent,

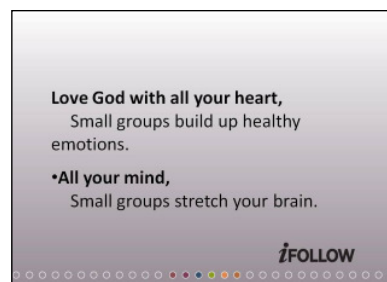


a Son, and an omnipresent, mysterious Spirit; a God who lives in us, and yet in Whom we live and move and have our being. We are not truly whole apart from community. We have always had our families and neighborhoods, our clans and tribes and nations. But the “New” Covenant Jesus delivered to us (a very ancient covenant, renewed in terms of a human face we can imagine) calls us to commitment to a new kind of community. We are, as we like to sing, “part of the family of God.”

People have an ingrained need to belong to something big, something they can imagine as grand and glorious. Thus we have nations with national anthems and flags, mega-churches in which thousands of voices join in praise to the Creator, church conventions where tens of thousands from all over the world come to share their stories. All of these are inspiring and uplifting, but don’t give much practical, ongoing help in the daily minutiae of life.

And so, people have also an ingrained need for the intimacy and authenticity of that micro-church known as the small group, or cell group. Here, it is impossible to be merely a number, impossible to hide in anonymity, possible only briefly to posture in churchly masks or delusions of grandeur. These people know you—you *will* be found out. And the silent, ravenous, gut-deep need that caused the posturing and the masks will be tenderly called forth into the light. The desire for power will be filled instead with the genuine empowerment that is the birthright of the child of God. The longing for approval and people-pleasing will be replaced with true love, and fear will be overcome by honest compassion for others.

We are called to love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, and all our strength. In the small group, our hearts will become well-rounded and healthy, learning to understand and express emotions in ways that build up, rather than tear down. Our minds will be fed with truths that will stretch them to the limits of their strength—and beyond, thus making them stronger and clearer. Our souls, our spirits, will become aware that they are meant to be secretly but unbreakably connected to that One Mighty Spirit who breathes life into all, and are thus also inextricably bound to the struggling souls around us. Even our bodies will become stronger and healthier as we encourage each other to care for the whole self, the whole temple of God.



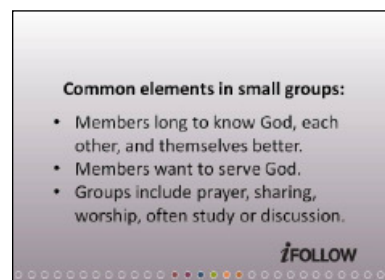
All of these things can happen in a small group in ways that could never be accomplished in the large bodies of Christ we call churches and conferences. Well and good. Yet there are many kinds of small groups. In fact, there is a bewildering array of small group styles and types. An online search brings up literally millions of hits, with courses, seminars, manuals, instructions, how-to's, how-not-to's, warnings, and anecdotes galore. One glance at the bulletin board of a mega-church committed to small group culture can be staggering. There are gardening groups, ladies' groups, special interest groups, parents' groups, senior groups, Bible study groups, prayer groups, and mission groups. What if one wants to start a new group? Where does one begin?

General Categories of Small Groups

This lesson will examine seven general types of small group within the church or spiritual setting. Probably the three most basic groups churches support are prayer groups, study groups, and mission groups. One group may contain all of these elements, but usually there is a main focus that is the group's stated goal. Beyond that, there are support groups, lifestyle groups, common interest groups, and there is one type of small group that is deserving of more interest and support, and that is what might be called an arts group.



There are common elements in all these groups. Each is composed of members who desire to learn to know God, each other, and themselves better, and to serve God in some way. All groups will include prayer, sharing, some kind of worship (with or without singing), and some kind of study or discussion. A very common and useful agenda for an all-round small group is to meet weekly for one and a half to two hours, and to spend one half hour in sharing and prayer, one half hour in singing and worship, and one half hour in study. The group that meets for two hours will use the extra half hour in whichever part of the schedule they feel needs more focused time.

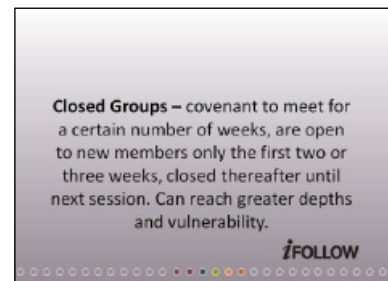


The danger is that the other half hour becomes chit-chat. Conversation, sharing, catching up, all are essential to the life of the group. But it's all too possible to spend an hour talking about nothing in particular until someone says with a start, "Oh! Our time is running out. We'd better get with it." A hurried prayer and a glossing over of the Bible reading for that day, and the group departs, glad to have spent time together, but not very strengthened for their

journey. Far better to seek prayerfully, discover what the focus of this group needs to be for this time, and plan accordingly.

Numerous studies have shown that small groups that last longer than two years at the most are almost always involved in some type of outreach or mission. So it might be a good plan to spend that other half hour in either developing a mission or ministry the group can do as a whole, or in sharing and supporting the ministries and missions of the individual members.

Open Groups or Closed Groups? Some groups covenant to meet together for a certain period of time, often somewhere between six and twelve weeks. They plan to develop a deeply trusting community, and to delve into matters of the heart and soul that are not for public consumption. These groups may allow new members only for the first two or three weeks, and are then closed to outsiders until the next session begins. They may maintain a waiting list, or suggest that more new groups begin if there is need. At the end of their covenanted period, they have a special celebratory meeting, then another period of open enrollment. In this way, the group does not have to deal with the turbulence sometimes caused by a new member who is unfamiliar with the group, does not know the territory that has already been covered, and may even feel left out and unwelcome. A new community is created each time a group begins anew, and trust develops so that the needs of all are served.



This is a good way for some groups to go, especially support groups, and most especially groups for the support and nurture of wounded people, such as survivors of abuse or those recovering from some form of addiction. Additionally, a group may choose to hold both open and closed meetings at different times. In a larger setting, open meetings may be quite large, and function as a gateway to a number of smaller closed groups where individuals can feel safe and loved.



Other groups meet for the intention of growing numerically as well as spiritually, and are always open to new members. These may be study or discussion groups, or any of several other categories. They may not reach quite as vulnerable a level of sharing and trust, so if there are members who need closer care, they could be either encouraged to join a group tailored for their needs, or they could be partnered by one other member of the existing group for deeper sharing and counsel outside the group setting.

It is important that these open groups maintain a low enough number that all are free to share. The general belief is that twelve is the largest comfortable number for a small group, in part because Jesus chose twelve, but some may function at a slightly higher level. It is almost never wise to allow a group to grow beyond fifteen regular attendees. If the concept of “multiplying” has been built in from the beginning, it will be less painful when the group becomes two. That is, the leader or facilitator has chosen another person very early, to be trained as a leader. There has been talk all along about the fact that the group is growing and will soon become two, preliminary plans for the “multiplying ceremony,” where and when the second group will meet, who will be a part of it, and so on. Then when the second group begins, though there will necessarily be a sense of loss and division, the excitement that a new cell has formed can overcome the sorrow. In the multiplying ceremony, there will also be time for expression of this loss and sorrow, what people are glad for, what and whom they will miss. There will also be plans for continuing the friendships that are formed, and ideally, all the groups meet together at church for corporate worship, anyway.

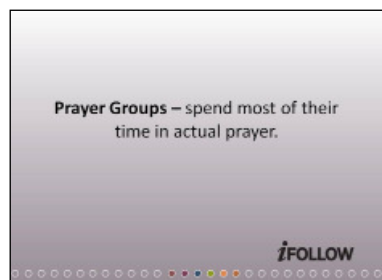
Let us now take a closer look at our seven categories of small group, and how the agenda could be formed for each style of group.

1. Prayer Groups

An unfortunate tendency in Christian churches is to have a midweek service called “prayer meeting” which has little prayer anywhere in it. Every devout Christian in the world would agree that prayer is one of the most basic needs, perhaps the most pressing requirement of Christian life, both individually and corporately. Yet how much time do we actually spend in prayer? Every church, if it has no other group, would do well to have an intentional, dedicated prayer group.

A prayer group is a group of people that prays together. Sometimes that is all they do. Usually they have a short Bible study, either on prayer itself or on the topic of prayer in which they are interested at the moment.

Here are a three sample agendas for a prayer group, as well as some suggestions to try.



Agenda A

1. One person is chosen to close the prayers at the end of the meeting.
2. A candle is lit to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit.
3. Ten minutes of silence.
4. Any individual who is moved to do so begins to pray aloud, followed by others.

5. Silence between prayers.

6. Prayer requests of individual members, instead of being shared with each other in God's presence, are shared with God during the prayers, in each other's presence.

7. The person agreed upon in advance gives a final prayer, thanking God for His presence and asking His continued guidance of each member of the group as they leave.

Agenda B

1. One person reads a passage from the Bible on prayer or the promises of God.

2. Twenty minutes sharing of prayer needs, joys, and concerns.

3. Each person prays aloud, taking as long as he or she needs, while bearing in mind that the prayer is to God alone, so there is no need for preaching sermons in it, and others also need their turn to pray.

4. The group prays silently or conversationally together to close.

Agenda C

1. The group meets to pray for a certain topic, perhaps a clear need in their congregation(s).

2. They read and study a passage in the Bible which speaks to this particular concern or need.

3. They divide into pairs to share and pray together in some detail.

4. They meet back together, perhaps holding hands or standing or kneeling in a close circle, to pray together, and close with a prayer song.

There are limitless variations on this theme. The group may structure the prayer meeting as they desire and need. Any of these prayer services is powerful and moving if the members truly open their hearts to each other and God, rather than speaking rote prayers they've said for years.

It's a good idea for the group to maintain a prayer list, perhaps a box or notebook, containing prayer concerns and joys. This prayer list may be open or closed. If a box is kept at the church for anyone to add to, there may be instructions that say, "If you wish your request to be opened and read, put it on a slip of paper. If you wish it to be known only to God, put it in a sealed envelope. It will be held before Him in prayer, but never opened by any member of the prayer group." Be sure these requests are not limited to prayers for physical need or healing, but invoke God's

power for spiritual health as well. Always pray for forgiveness, singly and corporately. If you keep track of answered prayers, be sure you don't measure "answered" only by whether it came out the way the seeker hoped.

Suggestions for Prayer Groups

Light a candle to represent the presence of the Spirit. Or have a candle-lighting ceremony in which members light each other's candles, or each lights his or her own candle at a large candle representing God's love.

Ring a clear-toned bell at the beginning and/or end of the prayer time.

Vary the ways you pray. Pray aloud, pray silently, pray in pairs. Sing some of your prayers.

Meet outside when possible. Pray in the woods or on the beach or beside a pond or lake, as Jesus did.

Have a blessing ceremony in which the prayer group meets at the church building and goes into to each room and area, praying fervently for the blessing and presence of God to be on all that happens in that space.

Take a prayer walk through your neighborhood or the neighborhood of the church, praying for every house and family you pass. Ask God to show you how to get to know the people and their needs, and begin to try to meet some of them.

Prayer is power, more power than we know what to do with. Be prepared for the surprising and unpredictable work of the Spirit when a group meets regularly to pray with all their hearts.

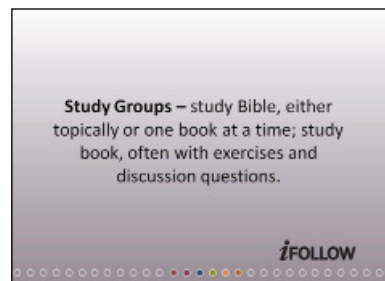
2. Study Groups

This may be the form of group which is most familiar to many people. There are two kinds of study groups—those which study the Bible exclusively, and those which study some other devotional book, such as one of Ellen White's writings, or one of the innumerable topical study guides written specifically for small groups, on subjects such as forgiveness, faith, Christian disciplines, or the like. In the latter case, although the books often contain discussion questions and activities, it is important that they also lead the group members more deeply into the Bible. No other book is of value if it takes the place of God's Word, rather than lifting it up and making it clearer and more vivid.

Agenda Suggestions

The most common agenda for the study group is some form of the one mentioned

above; a half hour of sharing and prayer, a half hour of praise and song, and the remainder of the time for study and discussion. The group may decide that each member shall read an agreed-upon portion before the meeting, and do writing or thought exercises, so that at the meeting they may discuss the insights they have gleaned. Or it may be more practical, given this busy age, to read the sections together during group time, and go through the questions and exercises together.



If they are studying the Bible itself, there are again two ways of going about it. They may choose one book of the Bible to go through verse by verse, or they may choose a topic and study it throughout the whole Bible, with the help of a concordance.

In any case, a common danger is that the study remains an exercise of the mind alone. It is easy and comfortable, especially for people who have been familiar with the Bible from their childhood on, to simply read a passage and agree with each other on all the “right” meanings and truths to be found there, never going any deeper, never asking any of the imponderable questions, never allowing any confusion or doubt; in short, never letting it touch the life in any meaningful way. If one does allow the Word into the deep places of the soul, one never knows what may happen. But if one does not, then no matter if the Bible is open, the door on which Jesus knocks is still shut. And that is the greatest disaster of all.

Suggestions to Shake Up Study Groups

Ask at the end of each meeting: Did I learn something I didn’t already know? Did I have a chance to share with someone else? Will this make a difference in my life this week?

As a group, brainstorm ways to respond to the text not just with the mind, but with the heart or feelings, with the body, and with the spirit. Make some art. Learn some new songs. Tell someone a secret you haven’t been able to share. One week, write all your responses with your non-dominant hand.

Call each other outside the group. Have a picnic. Meet in the park. Keep a journal.

Watch for the Spirit and welcome His unexpected ways. We can’t see where He’s coming from or where He’s going to, and the scary truth is, so it is with those who are born of His mighty, roaring breath.

3. Mission Groups

It has been said already that groups who want to last a long time need some sort

of mission, but it is also a valid mission of a small group that it exists to enrich the spiritual lives of its members so that they may live lives of outreach at all times. It may be sufficient that the group allot some of its weekly meeting time to discussion and encouragement of those ways in which its members already reach out in friendship to people with whom they come in contact.

However, there is also the group whose function is purely as a mission group. This group may come into being in one of two ways. The first, and often the easiest, is that it gathers around a mission that is already on someone's heart. One person has an idea. She wants to create a prison ministry in her town. The more she thinks and prays about it, the clearer grows the calling. She talks about it to her friends, in and out of church. Two or three others begin to say, "I'd like to do something like that." They plan a time to meet together and ask some of the questions. What are the legalities? What kind of help do they need? Will there be a need for funds? What will they do? Just make friendly visits? Write letters? Offer to teach a class inside the jail or prison? They pray, gather facts to determine what is possible in their city, and use consensus process to clarify their vision. A mission group is born.

The second way is that a group who already meets together wants to do something for God. They feel a need to reach out to others and offer some of the new depths of God's love they are learning to see and feel. This can be harder to grow, since there may be very different gifts and ideas in this already-formed group, and it may be difficult to settle on one way to serve God. Again, they pray and talk and brainstorm and use consensus to seek the will of God for their group.

A mission group's agenda will differ from that of other types of groups. Most of its time will be spent doing, rather than talking. The prison ministry group may meet to write letters to inmates, or to go on regularly scheduled visits. They may plan seminars if they have permission to offer some sort of class, or gather to create a re-entry support group for someone trying to make the difficult journey from life "on the inside" to a life of freedom and responsibility that he or she may never have succeeded in before.

However, it is extremely important that a mission group give extra care to the spiritual life of its members. It is far too easy for mortals to get so caught up in working for God that they forget to talk to Him. One of the mission group's most important tasks is to pray and study for the benefit and support of its own members. The studies they choose, the prayer requests they make will be dictated by the challenges, obstacles, and breakthroughs experienced as they do the work they're called to do. They may choose to meet once a month for internal ministry aside from the external mission



they do, and/or they may be sure to set aside at least a few minutes of every meeting for check-in time and prayer.

These things do not happen accidentally. They must be intentional. Missionaries' children should never go spiritually barefoot.

4. Support Groups

All healthy small groups are support groups in a sense. Every child of God needs helping hands, people that care, people that will hold them accountable, listen to them, carry them when they need it ... give them a kick in the pants when they need it! But some small groups are support groups in the clinical sense, groups that are formed specifically for the purpose of lifting up some who have fallen by the way and can't get up and go on alone.

Possibly the best-known form of amateur support group is the ubiquitous Twelve Step group. Formed originally as a way for recovering alcoholics to help each other, they have been so wildly successful that there are now innumerable variations for any form of addiction or unhealthy dependence, including co-dependence on another's addiction. It is a fairly simple matter to start one of these groups. There are endless resources both in bookstores and online, and Twelve Step groups have their own agendas and rules, outside the purview of this lesson.

Other forms of support groups can be invented by those who need them. They often are born when two people discover that they are facing a similar difficulty, such as memories of child abuse, anger issues, or addiction, including dealing with the addiction of a loved one. It is a good idea to have someone in this sort of group who functions as more of a counselor than the usual group leader. This may be a person who has been where the other members of the group are now, and has experience and wisdom to offer, or it may be someone with more training. The depth and severity of the problems will dictate where there should be a trained counselor or a pastor with excellent counseling skills present. It is worth saying that not all pastors, loving, godly, and willing though they may be, are equipped to deal with this kind of thing. A wise leader will also be able to help guide one or more members of this group to professional counseling if necessary.



Agenda Suggestions

Opening rituals: A support group especially may benefit from some quiet rituals such as lighting a candle, reading comforting Psalms or other contemplative portions of

Scripture, and singing songs which express the inmost heart and remind the group members of God's presence. Members of a support group may need most of all to feel safe, and these rituals and small ceremonies may help with that security.

Sharing time: The majority of the time in a support group will be used for sharing time, as each member "checks in," describing what's been happening in their world, perhaps crying or expressing anger, and being accepted and loved at all times. The facilitator watches over the conversation, helping to keep it on track and seeing to it that all get a chance to speak and a chance to listen. However, it seems to be generally true in these groups that it "just works out" that the one who needs the most time this week won't need as much next week, when it will seem to be someone else's turn to be in crisis. These groups should be kept quite small, four to six being a good number.

It cannot be overstated that the most sacred rule, for any small group, but especially for this kind, is that **what is said here remains here**. Anyone caught talking outside the group about the painful secrets revealed inside it cannot safely be allowed to remain, though the group leader may work with this person and eventually rehabilitate him or her to the point where it may be tried again, probably with a different group of people.

Closing rituals: These hurting souls need something that clearly demarcates the change from the safe haven of the group to going back to "real life." Good closing rituals may include hugs and circled prayer, silent or otherwise.

An important note for groups for abuse survivors: Members need to be aware and cautious about calling God "Father" and "He." This is not likely to be a good time or place for theological debate, and the truth is that the Bible clearly teaches that "the image of God" includes both male and female (Genesis 1:27) and that God can be visualized as Mother as well as Father (see Deut. 32:11; Ps. 131:2; Isa. 66:13, for example). For those, most often women, who have been seriously injured by men, it may be impossible, at least for a time, to imagine God as Father, or even as He. This should not be a problem, since we know that God is infinitely greater than any physical human idea of gender that we may hold.

5. Lifestyle Groups

A lifestyle group is somewhat like a support group, but not as intense. These are groups of people who meet together informally to share the difficulties they are having with some common problem, such as being a single parent, giving care to an elderly family member, surviving divorce, etc. Other forms of lifestyle groups are cooking groups which share healthful recipes, exercise, walking, or biking groups, and groups which meet to explore and learn about ways of reducing and managing

stress. This type of group can be an easy way for churches to reach out to their communities, and often become mission groups in their own way.

The agenda for this kind of group will vary quite widely. A parents' group may meet in a place and in a way where the children will also be welcome, and can therefore be reasonably chaotic. (The group reserves to itself the right to define "reasonably.") They may, instead, each take turns taking care of all the children so that the other parents get a peaceful couple of hours. An exercise, walking, or biking group meets for the purpose of pursuing their activity of choice, and a cooking group meets to share recipes and takes turns cooking for each other. There are even groups which meet weekly to make piles of casseroles, which they then divide up and take home to the freezer, providing suppers for participating families all week.

What can change these from a mere club to a true small group, meeting the needs of the whole person? It takes intentionality to do this. Sharing on some level will be inevitable. These are groups which create friendships, and friendships are where Jesus always starts. If the group, especially its leaders, will take care to include time for worship, prayer, and open sharing on a deeper level, this kind of group can be invaluable to its participants, its members, and its wider community.



Agenda Suggestions

Spend the first half hour talking and sharing, but make a point of including prayer requests and reports of progress in each one's personal life. Then spend some time in prayer. This can be silent prayer while biking or walking through the neighborhood, or conversational prayer in the place where the group is meeting.

Someone may, if the group wishes, prepare a brief Bible study or reading on a subject of interest.

Then, spend the bulk of the time on the activity for which the group exists.

Close with another prayer. Make specific promises to uphold each other in goals such as learning new parenting skills, eating more wisely, or exercising a certain number of times in the coming week. If the reason the group meets is a difficult problem such as dealing with the after affects of divorce or widowhood, or care giving at home, it can be helpful to create pairs of partners who will call on each other during the week. This group is not just here to talk about the problem; it's here to find practical ways to help.

6. Interest Groups

These are groups of likeminded people who come together around a certain interest or hobby. There are long-lived Bible study groups who survive much longer than expected simply because the members are intellectuals, and love lexicons and exegesis and esoteric theology. That may be an unusual hobby, but it can be just that. And it's a good one to have, as long as it doesn't take itself too seriously, grow divisive, or neglect the more important matters of loving its neighbors.

This group can be a woodworking group, a gardening group, a sewing circle, or even a library book discussion group. The possibilities are endless, and exist wherever there are two or three people who like to do the same thing. Like the lifestyle groups above, it can be an easy way to reach out to the community, create friendships, and make the doors of the church a little less intimidating. And again, it takes intentionality to make it into a circle of love, and not just a gathering for fun. There's nothing wrong with fun. God invented it, and gave people their different interests and talents. And if there's recognition of where those interests and talents came from, this, too, can be a truly life-building small group.

Agenda Suggestions

These are similar in many ways to the types of groups mentioned above. They make time for some prayer and sharing, and perhaps some study on a relevant topic. But these groups are particularly suited to becoming both fun groups and mission groups. Besides the activity the group meets to enjoy for themselves and each other, they can find a way to make something for someone else. The sewing circle can make baby quilts for preemies in the local hospital. The gardening group can share its bounty with the food pantry, or better yet, teach neighbors how to grow some of their own food in a community plot. The woodworkers can make beautiful prayer request boxes for each church in the community, and donate them free of charge as their way of sharing the love of God. Even the library book club, which may not read only religious books, can find words of life and truth in whatever they are reading, and usually find some doorways into each other's hearts and souls as well.



7. Arts Groups

The seventh form of small group is one that is rarely seen, but is growing in popularity and deserves more attention. It is arguable, though not provable, that all or nearly all art, music, and dance in the world was originally intended for worship—whether worship of the true Creator, or worship of animals, trees, and evil spirits.

Certainly, throughout the Bible, worship was a whole-body activity. The sanctuary was designed to appeal to the senses in a variety of ways, from smells of sacrifices and the taste of the shared meals that came from them, to the bright colors and textures of the sanctuary and its hangings to the sound of the *shofar* and the singing, dancing, and music, most of which would probably have sounded like a disorganized cacophony to our western ears, given the lists of instruments the Bible names!

Throughout the centuries, worship still used all the senses, with Passion and morality plays, polyphonic music, and stained glass and frescoes to tell the stories of the Bible for those who couldn't read it (either because of widespread illiteracy or because the church began to restrict access to the Bible.)

When the Protestant Reformers began to seek to purify the church, one of the things they repudiated was the sensuality and excess of the prevailing church of the day. However, they may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater in many ways. Like the Jewish reformers after the Babylonian captivity, building protective barriers around the commandments by creating hundreds of smaller rules and regulations, the Puritans and others like them seemed to have the attitude that, in order to protect against a feel-good religion, one should never do anything that felt good at all. In America to this day there is sometimes the sense that if something feels good, it must be wrong.

Today, many if not most churches seem to relegate all spirituality to the head. What little appeal is made to the senses is found in music and perhaps a little art in the sanctuary. Because of clear excesses of sensationalism, with practitioners of various sects appearing to believe that one can *only* know God through emotion, or that the Holy Spirit is not present at all if He does not cause overwhelming emotional displays, mainline and conservative churches including Seventh-day Adventist ones sometimes seem to fear all emotion and sensory participation in worship.

Yet we, of all denominations, have a clear conception of humans as whole beings. We believe the body plus the breath of life equals one soul. We preach and practice healthful care of the body all over the planet. Do we not stand in a unique position to call for the reunion of body and mind in worship?

There are churches who have Sacred Arts Ministries, with a stated two-fold mission of reclaiming the place of art in worship, and of reaching out to passionate artistic souls who may not want to be caught dead sitting passively on a pew listening to someone talk, no matter how eloquently. Imagine what might happen if every church had something like this? There could be small groups, either for the nourishment of art and artists in general, or, if there is enough interest, one group of 2-D artists who use pencil, pen, paint, chalk, etc., one of dramatic artists who put on skits and plays,



as well as scriptural and other spiritual monologues, one of 3-D artists such as potters and sculptors, and one of writers and poets. Depending on numbers, musicians may have their own group or may join with drama artists in one performance arts group.

Agenda Suggestions

Like the lifestyle groups above, arts groups need to see to it that their groups are not solely for getting together to paint, write, or sing, wonderful though that may be. Artistic people, in particular, may enjoy creating rituals for beginning and ending their time together. Artists are physical people, and do not generally learn or share well in plain auditory ways of sitting still and speaking or listening. Even discussion may not be particularly enjoyable for them.

Sample Agenda A

This agenda may be best suited to individual-type arts, such as writing, poetry, painting, and the like.

1. One half hour for sharing and prayer.
2. One person (each may take turns) spends five or ten minutes presenting a Bible passage or other spiritual topic or reading for the day.
3. One hour in which participants respond in their chosen artistic medium to the topic or passage presented.
4. Fifteen minutes of planning for an outreach the group will do, both within their congregation and outside it in the community.
5. Closing prayer.

Sample Agenda B

This type of agenda may be better for group arts such as music and other performance arts.

1. One half hour making practical plans for what they will present next, when, where, and how they will let people know about it. (Artists should do this first—it doesn't come easily to all of them!)
2. One hour creating, practicing, or otherwise working on the presentation they plan to share.
3. One half hour personal sharing and prayer. (Many times, artists may find they are more open and ready to talk about where they really are, after they have been able to give themselves up to their music, drama, or whatever it is, especially in the company of their likeminded friends.)

Some churches already have a choir which meets weekly to practice. With just one simple change, they can become a stronger small group (or more than one, if it's a large choir.) If the choir will add a few minutes of sharing and prayer before or after their rehearsal, they will be surprised at how their fellowship deepens and matures, as well as how their ministry is enriched and touches their listeners on a deeper level.

Evaluating and Evolving

All small groups have a timeline. It is as if they are organic creatures in themselves. There is one personality for each member of the group, and another personality of the group as a whole. Other lessons in this series go into more detail on the lifespan of groups, as well as evaluating and adapting. For this subject, setting agendas, the most important thing to bear in mind is simply that the group does not exist just to exist. It exists to meet the needs of its members and of the people with whom the members come in contact. When the plan doesn't work anymore, change the plan!

It is a good idea to go over some of these things quarterly or semi-annually, even if there is no apparent problem. Some difficulties can be headed off at the pass, with a little watchfulness. But what if a group is starting to feel stale, forced, or same-old-same-old? What if people aren't attending as regularly, or aren't participating as eagerly when they do come? The group doesn't necessarily need to disband, or even to multiply into two new groups. Perhaps all that is needed is a picnic break and then a new discussion that asks:

1. What do we do really well, enjoy, and see others enjoying?
2. What are we not doing so well, or doesn't work as we'd hoped or as it used to?
3. What new things would we like to try?
4. How can we create a new agenda that will accomplish these goals?

This may entail a simple discussion and some creative adjusting, or it may require a whole new consensus process meeting and some new brainstorming. There may be new members of the group who have ideas that will refresh everyone.

Or, of course, it may be time for the group to change, divide, or stop. The members may decide the group has done what it set out to do and is finished now. If so, have a special good-bye ceremony, honor those things you have enjoyed, cry over the ones you will miss, pray hard, and watch for the next opportunity. God has one. Always.

Handouts in this Package

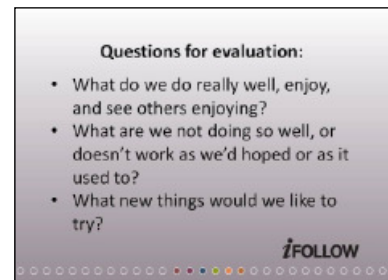
1. Seven Small Group Types
2. Evaluation Questions for Small Groups

iFollow
Discipleship
Series:
Working
with Jesus

Action Plan
& Presenter
Notes

**Small Group
Leadership:
Developing
Agendas for
Small Group
Meetings**

17



Additional Resources

Comiskey, Joel (n.d.). “The 4 Ws—Welcome, Worship, Word, and Witness/Works.” www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/basics/bestCellAgenda.htm (This is an interesting article which introduces four key elements in small group meetings. It also discusses the relation of agenda-setting to allowing the Spirit to lead.)

Lentz, Dan (n.d.). “Small Groups Sometimes Skip the Agenda: Small-group agendas don’t change people’s lives. Christ does.” www.smallgroups.com/search/results.html?type=keyword&query=Time%20management&filterid=10334

Resource Web Sites

Center for Creative Ministry is a resource center affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. It provides a free, email newsletter each week with a contemporary story that can be used to introduce Bible study. Included among the materials the center has created are a number of small group study guides: www.creativeministry.org

Christianity Today is the major Christian news publication in America. It provides a number of web sites on various topics, including one on small groups. Most of the materials are short articles on practical topics: www.smallgroups.com

Group Publications is an Evangelical Protestant nondenominational, parachurch publisher of children’s, youth and adult resource materials, including many study guides that can be used by small groups: www.groupcurriculum.org

Mark Howell is a well-known author of small group leadership materials and part of the pastoral staff at Adventure Church in Sacramento, California. His materials are available at: www.smallgroupresources.net

Parkway Apostolic Church in the suburbs of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was deeply influenced by Baptist missionary and church growth expert Ralph Neighbour. The church started a program of cell groups that has helped to grow to megachurch size. Some members have started an online bookstore for small group leadership materials: www.smallgroupmaterials.com

Saddleback Church is a Southern Baptist congregation in southern California that has grown into a megachurch and made its pastor, Rick Warren, quite famous. Small group ministries make up a large part of this church and it has launched a publishing venture to make its materials available to others. You can look at their materials at: www.lifetogether.com

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever participated regularly in a small group for prayer, Bible study and fellowship?
2. What did you like about this experience? What did you not like?
3. Are you still in one? If not, why did you leave?
4. How important do you believe small groups are in the life of the church?
5. Which of the seven types of group mentioned in this unit appeals most to you?
6. What would it take for you to start one?

Group Activity

Purpose: To try out, in a non-threatening atmosphere, some of the various type of small groups.

Preparation: Write the seven types of small groups (and any others you may know about) on a chalk board or flipchart. Have several tables or small seating areas available.

Assignment: Choose one or more types of small group which seemed to particularly appeal to attendees during the presentation, and have a sample run. Divide into groups of four to six. There may be groups who would like to try more than one type. Give them 15 to 20 minutes to do a skeleton agenda; five minutes for prayer; five to 10 minutes for study, discussion, or activity, depending on the type of group; five minutes praise and worship. Even something like an arts group can be “pretended,” in a sense, with large paper and crayons, or a Bible story to make a quick skit from. Don’t attempt to role play a serious support group, but any other is fair game.

Debrief: Discuss reactions, emotions, insights.

Time: Allowing a few minutes for people to choose groups, this activity could be done in as little as a half hour, or as long as an hour, especially if some want to try more than one group style.

Handout 1

Seven Kinds of Small Groups

1. Prayer Groups

Every church, if it has no other group, would do well to have an intentional, dedicated prayer group. A prayer group is a group of people that prays together. Sometimes that is all they do. Usually they have a short Bible study, either on prayer itself or on the topic of prayer in which they are interested at the moment.

Here are a three sample agendas for a prayer group, as well as some suggestions to try.

Agenda A

1. One person is chosen to close the prayers at the end of the meeting.
2. A candle is lit to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit.
3. Ten minutes of silence.
4. Any individual who is moved to do so begins to pray aloud, followed by others. There is silence between prayers.
5. Prayer requests of individual members, instead of being shared with each other in God's presence, are shared with God (during the prayers), in each other's presence.
6. The person agreed upon in advance gives a final prayer, thanking God for His presence and asking His continued guidance of each member of the group as they leave.

Agenda B

1. One person reads a passage from the Bible on prayer or the promises of God.
2. Twenty minutes sharing of prayer needs, joys, and concerns.
3. Each person prays aloud, taking as long as he or she needs, while bearing in mind that the prayer is to God alone, so there is no need for preaching sermons in it, and others also need their turn to pray.
4. The group prays silently or conversationally together to close.

Agenda C

1. The group meets to pray for a certain topic, perhaps a clear need in their congregation(s).
2. They read and study a passage in the Bible which speaks to this particular concern or need.
3. They divide into pairs to share and pray together in some detail.
4. They meet back together, perhaps holding hands or standing or kneeling in a close circle, to pray together, and close with a prayer song.

There are limitless variations on this theme. The group may structure the prayer meeting as they desire and need. Any of these prayer services is powerful and moving if the members truly open their hearts to each other and God, rather than speaking rote prayers they've said for years.

It's a good idea for the group to maintain a prayer list, perhaps a box or notebook, containing prayer concerns and joys. This prayer list may be open or closed. If a box is kept at the church for anyone to add to, there may be instructions that say, "If you wish your request to be opened and read, put it on a slip of paper. If you wish it to be known only to God, put it in a sealed envelope. It will be held before Him in prayer, but never opened by any member of the prayer group." Be sure these requests are not limited to prayers for physical need or healing, but invoke God's power for spiritual health as well. Always pray for forgiveness, singly and corporately. If you keep track of answered prayers, be sure you don't measure "answered" only by whether it came out the way the seeker hoped.

Suggestions to Try in Prayer Groups

Light a candle to represent the presence of the Spirit. Or have a candle-lighting ceremony in which members light each other's candles, or each lights his or her own candle at a large candle representing God's love.

Ring a clear-toned bell at the beginning and/or end of the prayer time.

Vary the ways you pray. Pray aloud, pray silently, pray in pairs. Sing some of your prayers.

Meet outside when possible. Pray in the woods or on the beach or beside a pond or lake, as Jesus did.

Have a blessing ceremony in which the prayer group meets at the church building and goes into to each room and area, praying fervently for the blessing and presence of God to be on all that happens in that space.

Take a prayer walk through your neighborhood or the neighborhood of the church, praying for every house and family you pass. Ask God to show you how to get to know the people and their needs, and begin to try to meet some of them.

Prayer is power, more power than we know what to do with. Be prepared for the surprising and unpredictable work of the Spirit when a group meets regularly to pray with all their hearts.

2. Study Groups

There are two kinds of study groups; those which study the Bible exclusively, and those which study some other devotional or theological book, such as one of Ellen White's writings, or one of the many topical study guides written specifically for small groups, on subjects such as forgiveness, faith, Christian disciplines, or the like. In the latter case, although the books often contain discussion questions and activities, it is important that they also lead the group members more deeply into the Bible. No other book is of value if it takes the place of God's Word, rather than lifting it up and making it clearer and more vivid.

Agenda Suggestions

The most common agenda for the study group is some form of—a half hour of sharing and prayer, a half hour of praise and song, and the remainder of the time for study and discussion. The group may decide that each member shall read an agreed-upon portion before the meeting, and do writing or thought exercises, so that at the meeting they may discuss the insights they have gleaned. Or it may be more practical, given this busy age, that they read the sections together during group time, and go through the questions and exercises together.

If they are studying the Bible itself, there are again two ways of going about it. They may choose one book of the Bible to go through verse by verse, or they may choose a topic and study it throughout the whole Bible, with the help of a concordance.

Suggestions to Shake Up Study Groups

Ask at the end of each meeting: Did I learn something I didn't already know? Did I have a chance to share with someone else? Will this make a difference in my life this week?

As a group, brainstorm ways to respond to the text not just with the mind, but with the heart or feelings, with the body, and with the spirit. Make some art. Learn some new songs. Tell someone a secret you haven't been able to share. One week, write all your responses with your non-dominant hand.

Call each other outside the group. Have a picnic. Meet in the park. Keep a journal.

Watch for the Spirit and welcome His unexpected ways. We can't see where He's coming from or where He's going, and the scary truth is, so it is with those who are born of His mighty, roaring breath.

3. Mission Groups

A mission group's agenda will differ from that of other types of groups. Most of its time will be spent doing, rather than talking. A prison ministry group, for instance, may meet to write letters to inmates, or to go on regularly scheduled visits. They may plan seminars if they have permission to offer some sort of class, or gather to create a re-entry support group for someone trying to make the difficult journey from life "on the inside" to a life of freedom and responsibility that he or she may never have succeeded in before.

However, it is extremely important that a mission group give extra care to the spiritual life of its members. It is far too easy for mortals to get so caught up in working for God that they forget to talk to Him. One of the mission group's most important tasks is to pray and study for the benefit and support of its own members. The studies they choose, the prayer requests they make will be dictated by the challenges, obstacles, and breakthroughs experienced as they do the work they're called to do. They may choose to meet once a month for internal ministry aside from the external mission they do, and/or they may be sure to set aside at least a few minutes of every meeting for check-in time and prayer.

These things do not happen accidentally. They must be intentional. Missionaries' children should never go spiritually barefoot.

4. Support Groups

Twelve Step groups: Look online for resources and information about how to begin one in your church.

Other forms of support groups can be invented by those who need them. They often are born when two people discover that they are facing a similar difficulty, such as memories of child abuse, anger issues, or addiction, including dealing with the addiction of a loved one. It is a good idea to have someone in this sort of group who functions as more of a counselor than the usual group leader. This may be a person who has been where the other members of the group are now, and has experience and wisdom to offer, or it may be someone with more training. The depth and severity of the problems will dictate where there should be a trained counselor or a

pastor with excellent counseling skills present. It is worth saying that not all pastors, loving, godly, and willing though they may be, are equipped to deal with this kind of thing. A wise leader will also be able to help guide one or more members of this group to professional counseling if necessary.

Agenda Suggestions

Opening rituals: A support group especially may benefit from some quiet rituals such as lighting a candle, reading comforting Psalms or other contemplative portions of Scripture, and singing songs which express the inmost heart and remind the group members of God's presence. Members of a support group may need most of all to feel safe, and these rituals and small ceremonies may help with that security.

Sharing time: The majority of the time in a support group will be used for sharing time, as each member "checks in," describing what's been happening in their world, perhaps crying or expressing anger, and being accepted and loved at all times. The facilitator watches over the conversation, helping to keep it on track and seeing to it that all get a chance to speak and a chance to listen. However, it seems to be generally true in these groups that it "just works out" that the one who needs the most time this week won't need as much next week, when it will seem to be someone else's turn to be in crisis. These groups should be kept quite small, four to six being a good number.

It cannot be overstated that the most sacred rule, for any small group, but especially for this kind, is that **what is said here remains here**. Anyone caught talking outside the group about the painful secrets revealed inside it cannot safely be allowed to remain, though the group leader may work with this person and eventually rehabilitate him or her to the point where it may be tried again, probably with a different group of people.

Closing rituals: These hurting souls need something that clearly demarcates the change from the safe haven of the group to going back to "real life." Good closing rituals may include hugs and circled prayer, silent or otherwise.

An important note for groups for abuse survivors: Members need to be aware and cautious about calling God "Father" and "He." This is not likely to be a good time or place for theological debate, and the truth is that the Bible clearly teaches that "the image of God" includes both male and female (Genesis 1:27) and that God can be visualized as Mother as well as Father (see Deut. 32:11; Ps. 131:2; Isa. 66:13, for example). For those, most often women, who have been seriously injured by men, it may be impossible, at least for a time, to imagine God as Father, or even as He. This should not be a problem, since we know that God is infinitely greater than any physical human idea of gender that we may hold.

5. Lifestyle Groups

A lifestyle group is somewhat like a support group, but not as intense. These are groups of people who meet together informally to share the difficulties they are having with some common problem, such as being a single parent, giving care to an elderly family member, surviving divorce, etc. Other forms of lifestyle groups are cooking groups which share healthful recipes, exercise, walking, or biking groups, and groups which meet to explore and learn about ways of reducing and managing stress. This type of group can be an easy way for churches to reach out to their communities, and often become mission groups in their own way.

The agenda for this kind of group will vary quite widely. A parents' group may meet in a place and in a way where the children will also be welcome, and can therefore be reasonably chaotic. (The group reserves to itself the right to define "reasonably.") They may, instead, each take turns taking care of all the children so that the other parents get a peaceful couple of hours. An exercise, walking, or biking group meets for the purpose of pursuing their activity of choice, and a cooking group meets to share recipes and takes turns cooking for each other. There are even groups which meet weekly to make piles of casseroles, which they then divide up and take home to the freezer, providing suppers for participating families all week.

What can change these from a mere club to a true small group, meeting the needs of the whole person? It takes intentionality to do this. Sharing on some level will be inevitable. These are groups which create friendships, and friendships are where Jesus always starts. If the group, especially its leaders, will take care to include time for worship, prayer, and open sharing on a deeper level, this kind of group can be invaluable to its participants, its members, and its wider community.

Agenda suggestions:

Spend the first half hour talking and sharing, making a point of including prayer requests and reports of progress in each one's personal life. Then spend some time in prayer. This can be silent prayer while biking or walking through the neighborhood, or conversational prayer in the place where the group is meeting.

Someone may, if the group wishes, prepare a brief Bible study or reading on a subject of interest.

Then, spend the bulk of the time on the activity for which the group exists.

Close with another prayer. Make specific promises to uphold each other in goals such as learning new parenting skills, eating more wisely, or exercising a certain number of times in the coming week. If the reason the group meets is a difficult problem such as dealing with the after affects of divorce or widowhood, or caregiving at home, it can be helpful to create pairs of partners who will call on each other during the week.

This group is not just here to talk about the problem; it's here to find practical ways to help.

6. Interest Groups

These are groups of likeminded people who come together around a certain interest or hobby. There are long-lived Bible study groups who survive much longer than expected simply because the members are intellectuals, and love lexicons and exegesis and esoteric theology. That may be an unusual hobby, but it can be just that. And it's a good one to have, as long as it doesn't take itself too seriously, grow divisive, or neglect the more important matters of loving its neighbors.

This group can be a woodworking group, a gardening group, a sewing circle, or even a library book discussion group. The possibilities are endless, and exist wherever there are two or three people who like to do the same thing. Like the lifestyle groups above, it can be an easy way to reach out to the community, create friendships, and make the doors of the church a little less intimidating. And again, it takes intentionality to make it into a circle of love, and not just a gathering for fun. There's nothing wrong with fun – God invented it, and gave people their different interests and talents. And if there's recognition of where those interests and talents came from, this, too, can be a truly life-building small group.

Agenda suggestions:

These are largely similar to those above – make time for some prayer and sharing, and perhaps some study on a relevant topic. But these groups are particularly suited to becoming both fun groups and mission groups. Besides the activity the group meets to enjoy for themselves and each other, they can find a way to make something for someone else. The sewing circle can make baby quilts for preemies in the local hospital. The gardening group can share its bounty with the food pantry, or better yet, teach neighbors how to grow some of their own food in a community plot. The woodworkers can make beautiful prayer request boxes for each church in the community, and donate them free of charge as their way of sharing the love of God. Even the library book club, which may not read only religious books, can find words of life and truth in whatever they are reading, and usually find some doorways into each other's hearts and souls as well.

7. Arts Groups

Throughout the Bible and most of history since, worship has been a whole-body activity. The desert sanctuary was designed to appeal to the senses in a variety of ways, from smells of sacrifices and the taste of the shared meals that came from

them, to the bright colors and textures of the sanctuary and its hangings to the sound of the *shofar* and the singing, dancing, and music, most of which would probably have sounded like a disorganized cacophony to our western ears, given the lists of instruments the Bible names!

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4. Fifteen minutes of planning for an outreach the group will do, both within their congregation and outside it in the community.
5. Closing prayer.

Sample Agenda B

This type of agenda may be better for group arts such as music and other performance arts.

1. A half hour making practical plans for what they will present next, when, where, and how they will let people know about it. (Artists should do this first; it doesn't come easily to all of them!)
2. An hour creating, practicing, or otherwise working on the presentation they plan to share.
3. A half hour personal sharing and prayer.

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HANDOUT

**Small Group
Leadership:
Developing
Agendas for
Small Group
Meetings**

Handout 2

Questions for Small Group Evaluation

1. What do we do really well, enjoy, and see others enjoying?
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