

Thoughts and Suggestions for Small Group / Bible Study Leaders

Thoughts and discussion points for your first meeting

- The goal is to get acquainted, present expectations, and preview the study
- Begin with prayer and brief introductions (begin with yourself)
- Provide a brief overview of the format and expectations for each class (*all should come having completed the assignment for the week, all are invited to share, “There are no bad questions,” as the facilitator, you will guide discussions to ensure conversations are positive and focused*).

Teaching is a different art than preaching. Preaching (which includes teaching from the pulpit or via video) is one-directional information. This presentation format is time-honored and was utilized by Jesus Himself (for example, in the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse). Teaching, on the other hand, is interactive—it is a dialogue more than a monologue. Jesus taught more than preached. This document is provided as an aid to the *teacher*.

A good teacher is a facilitator—one who asks probing questions to illuminate the text and help participants in the study learn from each other and apply the spiritual principles embodied in Scripture. A great teacher will create and maintain a learning environment whereby people feel free to share, ask questions, pray, and benefit from the discussion.

What follows is an article by Mark Ballenger, a Christian counselor and facilitator extraordinaire. The title of his article is *How to be an effective small group leader*.

How To Be An Effective Small Group Leader by Mark Ballenger

Small group Bible studies are not just a great idea. They are a biblical idea. From the moment the New Testament church was founded, core to its identity was small bands of Christians meeting together and studying God’s word ([Acts 2:42-47](#), [Acts 17:11](#), [Colossians 3:16](#), [Colossians 4:15](#)).

Of course small group Bible studies are not as important as the actual church and what happens Sunday morning. And there are certainly other effective formats that fulfill the church’s obligation to teach its members outside of Sunday morning (classes, support groups, one-on-one discipleship, etc.). But one of the clearest [signs of a healthy church](#) is a healthy small group Bible study ministry.

I believe if you want a healthy small group ministry, it all starts with having great small group leaders. So how can you be a great small group leader? Or if you're in church leadership and are looking for great small group leaders, what are some signs to consider?

What follows is not an exhaustive list or one ranked by importance. It is simply a list of 15 keys to being a great small group leader.

1. Take Fear Out The First Night

Many people who sign up for your small group have never done anything like this before. People fear what they don't know. "Will they make me share my darkest secrets?" "What if they ask me to read out loud? I'm a horrible reader!" "Will I look unprepared since I don't have the study guide yet?" "Did I sign up for the right day? What if I go and no one is there?"

Sometimes small groups lose people before they even begin because the leader fails to let the group members know what to expect. To have a great first session, send everyone a warm, personal email outlining where/when the group meets, what to bring, what study to buy, and what the first night will be like. And if you want to be a super leader, give everyone a personal phone call a week before the group begins. This will help bring in those still on the fence about whether or not they should give your small group a shot.

2. Start and End On Time

Starting and ending on time is really important. It's a sign of respect. For every person who wants to study Romans 9 deep into the night, another person came to your house after working a 12-hour shift and needs to wake up at 5 A.M. for their next shift. One of the fastest ways to lose group members is to start late and end late. One of the best ways to get people to come back is to leave them wanting more.

3. Hospitality Matters

I hate to break it to you, but not everyone loves Maximus, your "cute" Rottweiler who thinks everyone who sits on the couch must want him to sit on their lap. Some people just can't focus with your toddler in the room, even though she really is adorable, so adorable no one can focus. And if you have 20 people in a room that comfortably fits 10, about 45 minutes into the group, those sitting on the floor will be watching the clock because their buns are so uncomfortable.

Serve food, show folks where the restrooms are, make the room a comfortable temperature, minimize distractions, and make your meeting site comfortable and inviting.

4. Accept That There's Always More That Could Be Said

No matter how great the topic seems or how stimulating the conversation has become, eventually, you have to move on. You might want to follow up each comment with a great classic quote that applies perfectly, but sometimes keeping the group moving is more helpful to the majority. People's attention spans are short. Constantly changing the angle, for example, from theological to practical, to humorous, and then to serious, can help people stay engaged. Also, when you want to end on time, you have to accept that some really good points will need to go unsaid.

5. Don't Be Passive with Intense Group Members

To be a great small group leader, you will want to create an atmosphere of encouragement and sharing. Small groups are not the place for heated debates, preaching, or want-to-be-counselors. One of the biggest roadblocks to creating this safe place where people will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and beliefs, even if they know they are not Bible scholars yet, will be other group members like the "aggressive talker," the "self-appointed co-leader."

Some people just talk over people whenever a thought pops into their head, which seems to be right during other people's time to share. Other people love to ask questions they already know the answer to because, deep down, they think they can lead this group better than you. Other people love doctrine but have yet to learn to love people, so they slam newbie Christians when they say something not quite biblical.

As the small group leader, you can't be passive with intense group members. If you are, the majority will suffer because of the actions of one – you. It's your responsibility to lead and facilitate the group.

Sometimes, giving your intense group member a personal phone call or meeting him or her for coffee can give you the opportunity to show them how they are coming across to the group. They may not even know how negatively they are being perceived. Most of the time someone will humbly receive your words of correction if they feel you are doing so out of concern and love for them. And if they don't, at least you can rest assured you did your best to lead them well.

6. Create A Culture Of Respect Towards Church Leadership

The longer a group stays together, the more tempting it will be for them to start complaining about church leadership. Sometimes it's healthy to talk about a frustration you are having in regards to the church, but small group is usually not the best time to discuss it. Besides, you never know who is in the group with you. Maybe the pastor's third cousin is there. Maybe someone is trying

your church after coming from a bad church experience and the complaints are just scaring them off. Remember the biblical directive to *let your every word be useful for edification*.

7. Don't Replace Your Church With Your Small Group

As a group leader, you must set the tone for the entire group. Oftentimes, people feel that if they go to small group, they don't need to go to Sunday service. A great small group is like a great Christian book. Great books don't replace the Bible. They make people want to read the Bible more. Likewise, an effective small group will not try to take the place of church but will cause people to want to engage more in the ministry of the church. Something is wrong if your small group is getting so closed off that the group is forgoing Sunday morning altogether.

Optimally, a Christian should be a part of a church and a small group Bible study. Note: A healthy Christian should not be a part of a small group and not attend and support a local church.

8. Empower Your Group Members To Use Their Gifts To Serve The Small Group

A great small group leader does what all great leaders do: they recognize someone's gifts and then give them opportunities to use those gifts for the betterment of others. Is Janice a natural servant? Ask her if she would be willing to lead and organize a monthly service opportunity for your group. Is Jeremy a prayer warrior? Ask him to keep track of the prayer requests each week and send out a reminder email to the group so his passion for prayer can ignite others. Does the Smith family have the gift of hospitality? Perhaps ask them to host the group next time so you can just show up at their house and lead while they get to do something they enjoy.

9. Do your part—trust God for the rest

Some nights will be better than other nights. Remember that it's not your job to make sure people grow, have a great time, and like the study. Your job is to give people the opportunity to experience these things. You need to keep distractions out and foster an environment conducive to learning, fellowship, and unity. But if people don't put in the intellectual, emotional, and relational effort needed, you can do nothing to make your group succeed. As the leader, you are a very important part of the success of your group, but group members have a lot of responsibility, too. If they don't put in the effort, try as you might, and your group will not reach their potential. Pray. Trust God. Do well at planting and watering and believe that *God will cause the increase*.

10. Resist The Urge To Do Every Good Idea

Small groups can do so many good things other than study the word of God, pray, and fellowship with one another. But be careful to stay focused and on track. Service opportunities, block

parties meant to evangelize the neighborhood, weekly potluck dinners on a different day of the week than the small group meeting time, and other good ideas can end up detracting rather than adding to the health of your small group.

A great small group leader prayerfully discerns the Lord's leading regarding balance. Be cognizant of the fact that many in your group likely have busy schedules. Offer options but don't make demands. This is especially important if these expectations were not discussed during the signup process, which would allow people to decide if they can fulfill these obligations.

11. Prepare Appropriately

People can sense it when you're winging it. Yes, you should rely on the Holy Spirit in the moment, but that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is not leading you to prepare too. Read. Study, Pray, Prepare. Write some discussion questions but don't be absolutely tied to them. Have a contingency plan. Trust that God will lead.

12. It's Okay To Admit You Don't Have All The Answers

One of the most important qualities of great small-group leaders is authenticity. A great small group leader is not afraid to walk into uncharted territories with group members, but she is also able to recognize when things are getting over her head.

Your group members will respect you more, not less when you admit you don't fully know the answer to a certain question posed by a group member or that came out of that week's study. Come ready with a plan on handling difficult questions you're unsure how to answer, "You know, that's a great question. To be honest, I'm not totally sure how to answer that at the moment. Let me think about it, do some research this week, and get back to you on that."

13. Set Measurable Goals

A great small group leader will know exactly what he or she hopes to accomplish that meeting—and be able to share those goals with group participants in 30-45 seconds or so at the start of each meeting. Note: It is important that your goals are clear, practical, and measurable. "I want each group member to grow closer to God" is an objective that is difficult to measure. But if you say, "I want each group member to be able to give one biblical response to the question: _____," this is very measurable.

Every meeting can be considered successful if these three specific things happen: 1) group prayer 2) the group studies God's word 3) there is the fellowship with other believers. If your group does these three things, I believe God is honored.

14. Don't Be The First Person To Answer Your Own Questions. Empower Shy Or Quiet Group Members

When you pose a question to the group, and no one immediately answers it, the natural urge is to take the initiative and fill the void. However, a mature small group leader will be comfortable with the silence. Waiting for someone to answer puts the responsibility on your group members to participate.

I found that, eventually, someone will break the silence. Some people are really shy, so they defer to others. But if a few moments of silence go by, this gives these people enough time to work up the courage to participate. Lastly, be creative in empowering shy group members. Don't put people who are obviously nervous on the spot. But after a few sessions, give your shy group members a softball question you know they can answer with confidence. Ask them their opinion since there is no wrong answer here. Or ask them to read a passage of the Bible for the group, which allows them to participate but without having to come up with things to say on their own.

15. Ask God To Minister To You Through As You Lead The Study—Emphasize Prayer

A great small group leader knows he must not only feed others but also be fed himself. You have to take care of your own heart first if you hope to steward the small group God has entrusted to you effectively. This is why wise Christians surround themselves with ministry opportunities and people willing to minister to them. We need three different types of people in our lives: People we can minister to, people we can minister beside, and people who can minister to us.

The list of things that make a great small group leader could go on and on forever. But perhaps the most important thing all great small group leaders do is that they prepare through prayer.

No matter how much you know, how great your questions will be, and how friendly a host you are, if God does not intervene, great fruit for the Kingdom of God will not be produced. Pray that God will take your offering of service (like the boy in John 6 who offered a few pieces of bread and fish), and multiply what you give so many are blessed. Remember, no matter what deficiencies you might have as a small group leader, God can always bring glory to himself through someone who is willing to obey and follow him.