

# Encouraging God-Centered Small Groups

## What is a Christian Small Group?

*"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Mat 18:20)*

**Definition:** A Christian small group is a community of 6-10 (not more than 12) people who have willingly and purposefully gathered together to support one another, to help each other grow spiritually, to hear God, and to extend the Kingdom of God to a hurting world.

**Purpose:** God has gifted every Christian to function as a member of the Body of Christ on earth. Small groups are one of the many vehicles through which the Body of Christ can be visibly demonstrated:

- Ministry to one another
- Discipleship
- Development of each person's gifts
- Employment of those gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ
- Outreach to the community and world

**(1) Ministry to one another:** A small group is a place where members feel loved, accepted and at home. Small groups provide the framework where people can be transparent, can learn to speak the truth in love, and can develop mutual trust.

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another---and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb 10:24-25).*

**(2) Discipleship:** Members grow spiritually through Bible study, prayer, and ministry to one another. They learn to look to the Holy Spirit as the Teacher of the group, allowing Him to guide and work in and through each member.

*I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).*

**(3) Development of each person's gifts:** Those whom God brings together in a small group are equipped with all the gifts needed to accomplish that group's purpose, whether it be Bible study, support, fellowship, planning, economic development or church work.

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-7).*

**(4) Employment of those gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ:** Small groups are a place where members are "built up" into the fullness of Christ. As the group bonds and becomes a safe place, each person's gifts will emerge and enrich other members of the group.

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:15,16).*

**(5) Outreach to the community and world:** As participants learn to identify and encourage each other's gifts, the scope of their ministry is broadened in the Kingdom and a watching world will see God at work among them.

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal. 6:9,10).*

## How Do Small Groups Work?

The small group concepts and practices that we are proposing in this section may be different from what you have previously experienced in a typical small group meeting in your church. They are certainly different than the “leadership” methods practiced in secular society. In working with hundreds of groups, both in the United States and Africa, we have discovered, through observation and trial and error, that these suggestions are “best practices.” When used together, they will enable the small groups to bond quickly, be extremely productive, and work together with energy and enthusiasm to discern God’s will. The groups using these “best practices” have been life-changing for those involved, and group members have been empowered to reach out in the church and to the world.

### I. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher

*“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students” (Matt. 23:8)*

In our culture, we are accustomed to having the leader of a group be the "chair" or the “boss” or the "teacher,” with group members deferring to the leader. But in a Christian small group, the Holy Spirit is the Teacher, and the group leader is a servant to the group. Some of these “how to’s” for small groups are not consistent with the way we have been trained in our competitive, fast paced world. It may be difficult for group members, especially when leading, to step back, ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then stay out of the way. But we have found that God empowers people through small group dynamics in unique and wonderful ways if they will trust in and rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance.

As a group session leader, if you let others answer the questions that arise, instead of answering them yourself, the group will become more and more open and engaged in what is happening. Everyone will begin to participate instead of always looking to the leader for the answers. If you give the answers, the group will become passive and accustomed to deferring to the leader.

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understand; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:5-6)*

### Best Practices

- **Watch for God at work in the lives of the group members.**
- **Remember, a good session or topic leader remains teachable.**

## II. Rotation of Leadership

*“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1Cor. 12:4-7)*

We have discovered that rotating leadership is a key element in building strong small groups. As group members have the opportunity to serve the group by taking turn at leading and co-leading, they develop their God-given gifts. Each person can learn from the varying leadership styles and gifts that other members bring to the group. Even the most tentative group members will rise to the occasion if supported and loved.

Rotating leadership also reduces the stress of “being in charge.” As the responsibility is shared by all group members, no one feels put upon or burned out by having to always be responsible for the maintenance of the group activities.

Sharing the leadership also reduces problems with those individuals who tend to dominate the conversation or challenge the group dynamics in other ways. They know they will have a turn as supported group leader, and this seems to lessen the problem of that person monopolizing the time during the meetings.

We have found that with rotating leadership it is difficult to tell who the leader is after the group has been meeting for awhile! The group members all become engaged and relaxed and the group is leading itself.

## Best Practices

- A group covenants from the beginning that the leadership will rotate. Begin rotating leadership responsibility as soon as possible.
- The group needs to make sure at the end of each meeting who will be leader and co-leader next time.
- Everyone gets a chance to lead and co-lead.
- If a group member is reticent, the group can let him or her watch others lead first, and co-lead before taking the session leadership.
- If there is a leader's guide or other materials, it will rotate to the upcoming leader.
- The group shouldn't let anyone dominate the discussion.
- Remember to wait for people to speak after posing a question.

## III. Servant Leadership

*"So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all' " (Mark 10:42).*

A servant leader is expected to model an attitude of humility, acceptance, patience, transparency, and honesty. In short, the group leader must adopt Christ's example of Servant Leadership:

**(1) A servant leader loves unconditionally--** He or she will seek to manifest Christ's love to each person in the group. To love unconditionally is to accept each member, regardless of what he or she says or does inside or outside the group.

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn.13:34).*

### Best Practices

- **Say to yourself frequently during the group meeting: “I really love the people that the Lord has brought to this group.”**
- **Always be looking for ways to serve the people in your group.**
- **Wait for God to reveal the gift that each person brings to the group. Point it out when you see it.**
- **Pray for strength and patience. Remember, God is at work in each person’s life.**

**(2) A servant leader is “actively quiet”**-- This is one of the most difficult tasks a servant leader must embrace. It will actually require “strength under control.” Rather than just being passively quiet, a servant leader is constantly looking for ways to serve the group, to encourage its members, to draw them out and to affirm them. But in order to do this, a leader must abandon the notion that he or she is in charge of the group – even if for only this session!

Groups usually become quiet when the leader speaks. The more the leader talks, the more the group will look to him or her for all the answers. Although the leader convenes and facilitates the group, his main goal is to make everyone feel welcome and safe in the group.

Leaders should allow plenty of time for responses to questions. Most of us feel uncomfortable with long periods of silence, but silence is not a bad thing. Unlike many extroverts, who tend to process questions and answers out loud, sometimes introverts in the group need a time of silence to think through the question and come up with an answer before speaking out loud.

*You must understand this, my beloved, let everyone be quick to listen, and slow to anger (James 1:19).*

## Session Leader Best Practices

- **When you hear yourself talking, remember you should be listening.**
- **If you ask a question, wait! Someone will usually jump in with an answer or comment long before even a minute is up.**
- **If you find it difficult to wait for answers, try taking your pulse unobtrusively by placing your fingers on your wrist and counting to 30. Repeat if necessary.**
- **Instead of coming up with the answer, pretend you are a Teflon pan and let the question slide back out into the group.**

## The Small Group Leader's Rap:

<i>(nodding your head)</i>	<b>“Good question!”</b>
<i>(shrugging shoulders)</i>	<b>“I don’t know.”</b>
<i>(looking at others say)</i>	<b>“What do you think?” (or)</b>
	<b>“What do you feel?”</b>

In school, we have been trained to jump in with the answer to a question. This “rap” is fun and very helpful for servant leaders to keep in the back of their minds when asked a question. By saying, **“Good question,”** you welcome, acknowledge and validate the person’s input to the group. By saying, **“I don’t know,”** you pass the question back to the group. By saying, **“What do you think?”** or **“What do you feel?”** you open the discussion to everyone and create the opportunity for others in the group to contribute.

It is difficult for each of us to say, “I don’t know,” when we think as leaders we must have the answers. In truth, we don’t know everything. Letting the group members bring their ideas enriches the discussion and opens the door to more participation.

It sounds simple, and it is. You’ll be amazed at what happens. At first the group members may be frustrated that you don’t give the answer – after all, you had the leader’s guide this week! -- , but after you look two or three times to the group for answers, the whole group will be engaged and energized.

**(3) A servant leader listens in love--** Every leader needs to learn how to listen. “Christian listening” is more than listening to just the words someone is saying. It is listening to understand what that person is saying, why he is saying it, and being open to discern what God wants to say through that person as a member of the Body of Christ.

*Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13:14).*

### **Best Practices**

- **Don't debate! Acknowledge even the most outrageous statement with: “That's an interesting view. Does anyone else have any thoughts on that?” Throw it back to the group so others may contribute.**
- **Use active listening, particularly when things get tense or the person speaking is too emphatic. (Active listening involves summarizing a point, incorporating it, and reflecting it back to the group—“Are you saying . . .?”) Keep giving it back to the group.**
- **Look for God's gifts being revealed. If we take seriously our job of building each other up in love, then we have a unique opportunity in small groups to help people recognize their gifts.**
- **Look for needs and concerns, hurts, or bigger issues that can be the focus of prayer.**

**(4) A servant leader is accepting--** A servant leader brings an attitude of openness, humility, and expectation for what God will do in the small group. He or she attempts to see how new statements, new material, or new people can be incorporated. Remember, the Holy Spirit is the true Teacher and Guide of the group. The Spirit may be unfolding a truth or new direction for the group.



*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged (Matt. 7:1).  
Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters  
(Rom. 14:1).*

### **Best Practices**

- **Accept people and statements without criticism or judgment.**
- **Acknowledge and demonstrate respect for the person with whom you may not agree.**
- **Watch for group members to minister to each other.**

**(5) A servant leader is open and honest--** One of the best ways to help members of a small group feel safe is for the leader to be open, honest and vulnerable. When the leader is open, others gain the courage to be vulnerable and talk about things that really matter to them.

### **Best Practices**

- **When you speak, remember to share about something personal —not about content.**
- **When the group gets “stuck” at a surface level, it’s time for the servant leader to open up and share deeply about a relevant personal struggle or issue.**
- **The leader’s humility will resonate with participants and stimulate their own deeper sharing.**

## IV. Co-leaders

*"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Eccl 4:9,10).*

Every leader does better with someone to depend on for help when needed. A co-leader serves as an advisor and encourager to the leader. The co-leader serves the leader by keeping time, helping when needed, and praying silently for the group throughout the meeting.

Two different people should lead and co-lead at each meeting. Decide at the end of each meeting who will be the leader and co-leader when the group meets again, or have a roster for the weeks ahead.

### Best Practices

- **When keeping time, communicate with the leader regularly. This can be done unobtrusively.**
- **If time has become a problem, ask for the group's help to get back on track.**
- **Don't skip having a co-leader – if someone is absent, have the leader ask for a co-leader at the beginning of the session.**

## V. Kujengana – “building up”

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:15,16)*

Kujengana (Koo-jen-GAN-a) is the Swahili word used in the Bible for "building up," as in building up into the fullness of Christ. Each member in the group is called to build up the other members in the group. Sadly, human beings are far more accustomed to giving and

receiving criticism rather than praise. Through the practice of Kujengana group members train their eyes to see, ears to hear, and tongues to speak the good they see in others.

**There are two steps of Kujengana:**

(1) At the end of each session, every member of the group makes one positive statement to the leader about his or her leadership of the meeting. Instead of making a general statement, like "You did a great job," it should be a specific statement about an observable behavior of the leader such as, "You came to greet me at the door, and said "welcome" when I came in, and I really felt welcome " or "I really liked how you encouraged us to speak, but also kept the discussion moving." Some groups also choose to include the co-leader in Kujengana. Each group member's Kujengana must be different than what has been said by other group members.

(2) Any member of the group may identify a gift he sees in the leader, encouraging him or her to use it more. Example: "You have a gift of encouragement. I saw it when you spoke to Mary. I'd like to see more of that."

The person receiving Kujengana may only say, "Thank you," to the remarks made by group members. Discussion is not allowed. At first, this is difficult because we are used to hearing the "but" after a positive comment, and are used to explaining why something we did wasn't good enough. It may feel awkward at first, but it doesn't take long for people to learn to relax and accept the blessing of Kujengana.

Because each person has to observe and comment on a different positive aspect, group members will quickly learn to "go first" to get their observation said before someone else mentions it. Thus, the session leader will not have to suffer agonies of anxiety as they wait for someone to start the process. Group members will also learn to see more than just one good thing that the session leader did, because they'll have to be ready in case their first choice is spoken by someone else first.

The whole group, not just the leader, benefits from the practice of Kujengana. Group members have an attitude of expectancy and eagerness as they begin to look for positive traits and actions during the meeting, rather than being critical. They also are training themselves to

speaking positive, rather than negative, comments. In addition, the whole group begins to hear what leadership traits the group values and enjoys. This will mean that the next session leader will be hearing what things to do that are valued, and their group leadership will be substantially improved. In a few weeks of rotating leadership and Kujengana, session leaders have dramatically better leadership skills, and the group meetings are more and more fun and effective.

### **Best Practices**

- **Allow five minutes at the end of each meeting for Kujengana.**
- **In early weeks, group members should remind each other so they can be looking for the positive.**
- **Begin Kujengana by saying something like: "I really liked how you . . . ."**
- **The recipient must only say, "Thank you" and not get into any discussion about it.**
- **Never allow negative messages or criticism disguised as a compliment.**
- **Identify any gift in the servant leader that you think could be brought out more.**

## **VI. The Schedule**

*"But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1Cor. 14:40).*

We have found that weekly meetings of two hours works best for groups in North America. Anything less cuts short the discussion, and, as the group becomes more comfortable, there is a lot to talk about. It is important, however, to end on time so group members know they can count on being able to leave. The meeting should formally end on time, and then anyone who wishes can stay afterwards and continue visiting.

### **A suggested time schedule for a two-hour small group meeting beginning at 7 p.m.:**

- |            |                        |
|------------|------------------------|
| (1) Gather | 7:00-7:05* (5-15 min.) |
| (2) Prayer | 7:05-7:08 (3 min.)     |

(3) Song(s)	7:08-7:14	(6 min.)
(4) Agreement on task and time	7:14-7:19	(2-5 min.)
(5) Group Work on task(s)	7:19-8:43	(1 –1 1/2 hours)
(6) Prayer Requests	8:43-8:53	(10 min.)
(7) Kujengana	8:53-8:58	(5 min.)
(8) Closing prayer	8:58-9:00	(2 min)**

\*Use more time if there are new members in the group. You can do quick introduction in pairs.

\*\*As the group spends more time together, group members often choose to spend more time praying together at the end of the session. Some of the group task time can shift to prayer time.

## Overview of Schedule

**(1) Gather:** Greetings and settling in. For most groups, if people commit to be on time, 5 minutes is enough to get settled. However, people will stand around and talk for 20 minutes if the session leader allows it!

If the group is just beginning or a new person has joined, more time will be needed for the group to gather. With a new person in the group, use Pair/Share for icebreaker/introductions.

*Suggestion:* Break into pairs with the following instructions:

- (1) Give your name
- (2) Tell something about your family
- (3) Tell something about yourself others might not know

After both people in the pair have had the opportunity to answer the questions, (one minute each) the whole group reconvenes and each person introduces his or her partner to the whole group (allow 10-15 minutes). Don't skip this part. It makes the newcomer/s feel much more welcome and a part of the group right away.

**(2) Prayer:** Opening prayer by that week's leader or someone the leader has asked ahead of time to pray.

**(3) Song(s):** Singing helps to bring the group together in worship and allows the Holy Spirit to be pre-eminent in the group. This might be awkward at first, but will become a welcome time of worship. Martin Luther said, “He who sings prays twice.”

**(4) Agreement on task and time:** The leader states the planned task for the evening and the group re-agrees to the planned task (for example, study and discuss chapter five of the Bible study). At any time the group may change the task if agreed upon. Occasionally, something may pre-empt the original task such as a personal crisis in the life of a group member. Although some people may say, “we agreed to do this last week, what’s the discussion for?” the time spent to assure that the group is committed to today’s task is critical to group effectiveness.

**(5) Group Work on Task(s):** If the group is doing a specific Bible study or course, the format will dictate the weekly tasks. At other times, group members have determined the tasks at the previous meeting. Schedule adjustments can be made at this point, allowing about 1 to 1 1/2 hours for group work.

**(6) Prayer Requests:** Members share their prayer requests with others in the group. Praying in quads (groups of three or four) in the beginning will help those who are not accustomed to asking for prayer or praying out loud. As the group members become more comfortable with one another, prayer time may be moved to the larger group. The session leader needs to set the tone of brief, personal prayers. If the group discerns the need for more prayer time, adjust the following week’s schedule.

**(7) Kujengana:** Each group member makes one positive specific, observable statement to that week’s leader about his or her leadership of the meeting. In addition, anyone may identify a gift seen in the leader.

**(8) Closing Prayer:** The leader closes in prayer or asks another group member to close in prayer. Once they have been meeting for a while, the whole group may want to pray together. This could be saying the Lord’s Prayer out loud or individual members could offer prayers. Sometimes that week’s leader begins and prays for the person on his or her left using that

person's prayer request. This continues around the circle until all have offered prayers. This usually takes about 5 minutes. As noted earlier, some groups decide to spend more time praying together.

**\*Accountability Sharing:** If the group has agreed to make this part of its task, individuals will share their progress with other group members after the group task has been completed, (approximately 10 minutes) and will readjust the time in the schedule.

#### **Best Practices**

- **Have a schedule or plan.**
- **Re-agree on what is to be done at the meeting.**
- **The co-leader keeps time.**
- **Don't leave any steps out.**
- **Remember to sing!**

## **VII. Covenant**

Each small group should agree on a set of group values, expectations and behaviors for which they will hold themselves mutually accountable. This should be done during the first or second meeting. The purpose of the covenant is to create trust, openness and safety within the group. Covenants are based on love and loyalty and are only valid if all parties seek to live by the covenant guidelines. Some groups and study materials create a written covenant, asking each group member to sign it. Additional points of the covenant can be added at any time by agreement of members.

In order for the group to be a safe place, the practice of "*confidentiality*" should be included in all covenants. Nothing that is shared within the group should be discussed with anyone outside the group. When people trust that what they share will stay within the group, they

will be more open and honest about struggles in their lives. Confidentiality helps the group to bond and build cohesiveness. (See Appendix for Sample Covenant).

**The covenant should include:**

- (1) The time and place you will meet. Some groups rotate meeting places among member's homes. Others meet at a church or restaurant. Meeting in just one home puts a burden on that "host."
- (2) Confidentiality - members agree that everything discussed in the small group will remain within the group.
- (3) Basic Purpose - the group should agree generally on what they are going to have as a task. "Study 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians" or "organize building and lawn care," or "do --- course or ministry."
- (4) If homework is included in the study, everyone agrees to attempt to complete it before each meeting.
- (5) Members should select a name for the group. If is fun and gives the group an identity. There is only one rule--groups are not named after the leader or individual members (i.e. Mary's group). Some groups call themselves "Covenant Group," "Outreach Group," "Oasis", or "Thursday Night Group." Some of the African groups we know of have named themselves "Mercy," "Hope," "Esther Group", "Love" and "Peace." Be creative!
- (6) Group members commit to pray for one another during the week.

**Best Practices**

- **Choose a name for the group.**
- **Decide on you study, plan or ministry.**
- **Agree on the place and time of meetings.**
- **Maintain confidentiality.**
- **Be willing to made additions to the covenant.**



## VIII. Accountability

Accountability can be defined as “submission to the counsel and oversight (but not control) of another person or group, with the willingness to be transparent and vulnerable in an environment of love and acceptance, for the purpose of becoming more obedient to God.”\*

We think it is a best practice to add accountability to the purpose of the group. If the group decides to do this, each member decides what he or she will do and will be held accountable for by the group. The group then agrees to encourage, pray for, and hold each person accountable in those identified areas. Accountability is never based on what one person thinks another should do. Each group member designates his own area of accountability, and then chooses an action step to be held accountable for each time the group meets.

**An action step is something that is:**

- Specific
- Observable (a fly on the wall can see you do it!)
- Measurable
- Has a beginning and an end

For example, “Becoming a better Christian” is not an action step because it is too general and does not meet the above criteria. But reading the Bible for fifteen minutes, five days a week is an “action step” that will help a person become a better Christian. Reading the Bible is an action step that is *specific* (read the Bible five days a week), *observable*, (a fly can see you reading), measurable (read 15 minutes), and *has a beginning and an end* (after 15 minutes you know that you have completed the action step).

When the group meets again, allow ten minutes near the end of the small group meeting for each person to report on his or her action step. Each person quickly:

- (1) Tells the group what his action step was for the past week.**
- (2) States what he actually did.**
- (3) States what action step he will take for the following week.**

If the person succeeded in his or her action step, the group celebrates the success.

\*From the *Life Management Study* by Ken Smith, Christian Stewardship Ministries, Fairfax, VA

If, as many times happens, especially in the beginning of accountability, the group member met only part of his goal—perhaps three out of five days--the group encourages him in love, never finding fault or blaming.

Often it takes weeks for people to report that the action step was completed. We tend to be very ambitious. It is better to say, “I will exercise five days this week for 30 minutes.” rather than say you will exercise every day.

If someone continues to fail at an action step, the group might encourage him or her to choose a different step. The person can always come back to the first one later, after he has had success in another area.

Remember, the report is just about what happened – no spin, no judging, no guilt, no excuses. When accountability is done in this way, it becomes very freeing. People are able to report and move on to the next step.

*Word of warning:* accountability groups are not counseling professionals. If someone confesses something to the group of a serious nature (i.e. marital infidelity, abuse, etc.) the person should be encouraged to talk with the pastor or seek professional counseling. The group can ask if there are action steps he or she wishes to take to change, but should not offer suggested actions.

#### **Best Practices**

- **Each group member decides his or her own area of accountability.**
- **Choose a reasonable action step.**
- **Begin small and grow.**
- **Build on your successes.**
- **Report back to the group weekly with just the facts: what I said I would do, what I did, what I will do next week.**
- **Pray for each other.**

## What Kind of Group Can Use These Best Practices?

Many different kinds of groups can employ the principles and techniques of the Christian small group. Some of these include:

- Home groups or neighborhood groups
- Bible study groups
- Prayer groups
- Discipleship groups
- Pastoral care groups
- Newcomer groups
- Fellowship groups
- Discernment groups
- Planning groups
- Support groups for widows and widowers
- Grief and divorce recovery groups
- Support and education groups for parents, married couples, stepfamilies, singles, mothers of young children.
- Conflict resolution ministries
- Specific ministry groups
- Outreach ministries
- Elected church leadership—vestry, deacons, etc.
- Church staff meetings
- Committees
- Youth groups
- Choir and music groups
- Drama/dance ministries
- Church volunteer groups—grounds crew, altar guild, etc.
- Handiwork groups—crafts, sewing, quilting

## **Life Cycle of a Small Group**

The life cycle of any particular small group will vary, depending on the purpose of the group. Some groups come together to do a particular discipleship study or task that has a determined end date. These groups may be closed to new members for a particular number of weeks until the study or task has concluded and then open if the group decides to continue meeting. Other groups, such as fellowship or support groups may go on for months or even years. Small groups must continually seek God's guidance to determine what His purposes and plans are for the group, and whether to continue meeting, to disband, or form new groups.

### **Meeting Schedule**

It is recommended and best practice that a small group meets once a week for two hours. Refer to the Schedule section to see recommended times and activities. Some groups may decide to take a break during holidays or not meet as often during the summer months while many are on vacation.

### **Multiplying Groups**

Discipleship groups should have the explicit purpose of reaching out to welcome and include new members. For this reason, an empty chair should always be placed in the small group meeting, available for the new person who might attend. The group members should agree and commit at the beginning to multiply into two groups when the 13<sup>th</sup> new member arrives. When the time comes to multiply, the group can split in two and begin two new groups, or 2-4 people from the original group can leave and form the core of the new group. This core team,

using best practices right from the beginning of the new group forming, is recommended over just one person convening a group.

### **Starting a Group**

If you feel you are being called to form a group, find a co-leader and another person to join you before your first “group meeting.” Learn the best practices and form a core so that rotating leadership can begin right away.

If (against all of our advice!) one person begins a group, he or she must go through a transition period during the first few weeks from *“convener,” to “invisible,” to “among best friends.”* First, as a convener of a small group, he or she will invite participants, create a safe place for them to speak, create an atmosphere where the Holy Spirit can work and teach, and build up each member. This is an entrepreneurial role. During the second phase, the leader becomes “invisible” by continuing to reflect questions back into the group. (See: Small Group Leader’s Rap, pg. 5.) It will also be necessary to take LESS than your share of the hospitality, organizational, and participatory roles of the group so others will step in and contribute. (Like John the Baptist, you are becoming “less” so the group can become “more.”) Phase three begins after the group has firmly established rotating the leadership. Then the original convener can blend into and participate just like all the other members who are now more and more like “best friends.”

Because you have convened the group, members will want you to continue being the leader. Resist the urge! One of the great advantages to having a leader and co-leader every week is that no one is ever alone in the leadership role.

## **Preparation for Ending a Group**

Ending a small group is always difficult because bonds of friendship and commitment have been formed among members. If it is a study group or a planning group, about three weeks before the small group is scheduled to finish their task, the group needs to talk about the fact that it will be difficult to end the group because of the relationships that have been formed. They need to acknowledge the fact that the group will go through a grieving process. The group should develop several options for dealing with their feelings of loss:

- Consider continuing as a Bible study or support group and re-covenant for a new time period
- Continue to meet once a month for fellowship and sharing
- Encourage members to go out as teams of 2-4 and convene new groups
- Pair off with accountability or prayer partners for intimate continuity

Group members help each other develop their gifts so that they in turn can build up the Body of Christ, and reach out to their church, their community and the world. Those members who turn their focus outward on “their mission” seem to get through the grieving process easier. Pray and discern what God is calling you individually or as a group to do next.

Don’t think that, if the group decides to move on to other things after a study or after a time of meeting the group has “failed.” We have seen many groups go into various areas of ministry, energized and equipped by the time spent in their small group.

## What are the Logistics of Running a Small Group

- (1) Groups should have 6 to 10 but not more than 12 people. This is very important. We have found that the dynamics change when there are more than 12 and the group is not as able to bond into a cohesive unit.
- (2) At the beginning of a group or if a new person joins the group, everyone in the group should do a quick paired introduction. A new person will then know something about each group member and feel welcome and more a part of the group.
- (3) Sit in a small, tight circle. It will encourage the group to bond more quickly. Even with a home group, sitting in a circle rather than living room chairs makes a difference.
- (4) Do not use tables—they are barriers to communication. Even if you have to juggle books or papers, it will make a big difference in the productivity and energy of the group!
- (5) Have an empty chair waiting for a new group member.
- (6) Break into pairs and quads during part of the small group meeting. (The “quads” can be 3, 3, and 4 if you have 10 members.) You can just turn chairs briefly and then turn back to the whole group circle.
- (7) Suggestions for using pairs and quads:

### ***Times to use pairs:***

- As an icebreaker for introductions
- to check Scripture memory (if part of study)
- to answer one question (allow 2 minutes per person)
- to raise the group’s energy level

### ***Times to use quads:***

- to pray for one another especially when group is first forming.
  - to brainstorm ideas and report back to the whole group
- (8) If you have a large group of people that must be put into smaller groups, use the method of counting off. For instance, if you have 40 people, have them count off by 4s, then have all the 1s, gather together, the 2s gather, etc. and make 4 groups of 10. This is a way to keep it random and also to have friends in separate groups to meet new people.

## How Do I Start Small Groups in My Church?

- (1) Talk to your pastor about starting a small group ministry in your church.
- (2) Encourage people to pray about what kind of small group ministry God wants in their church.
- (3) Consider holding a small group workshop to train people interested in joining a small group. You can do this in different ways:
  - invite everyone in the church who is interested in learning about small groups to come and learn best practices and decide what groups they would like to convene;
  - do a leader training to learn best practices and have them form a small group around a serious discipleship 13 week study like Experiencing God by Henry Blackaby or Life Management Study by Ken Smith of Christian Stewardship Ministries. They would agree to go out afterwards and start new groups.
  - train existing small groups in “best practices,” with the encouragement to try it for at least six weeks.
- (4) Discern what kinds of small groups God would have you form, such as support, discipleship, planning, fellowship, etc. (See: What Kinds of Groups Can Use These Best Practices, pg. 16.)
- (5) Put an announcement in the church bulletin, with your pastor’s approval, about the formation of small groups.
- (6) Make sure you keep the lines of communication open with the pastor and obtain his or her approval and oversight. Small groups without this oversight can become “church gripe groups” or move into spiritual error and heresy.
- (7) Ask your pastor and lay leaders to refer people who are looking for, or who would benefit from, a small group. This is a great way to welcome newcomers who don’t know anybody yet.
- (8) Personally invite people you know and ask friends to spread the word.
- (9) Once groups are beginning, it is important to appoint a small group administrator within the church who will keep the listing of small groups up to date and posted on a church bulletin board, in the newsletter, or on the church website.



- (10) Small groups should be listed with start date, how to contact members, meeting place, and whether the group is currently “open” or “closed.” (Groups may be closed to new members for a specified time after week one or two if the study they are using builds upon concepts from previous weeks, and it would be difficult for newcomers to catch up.)
- (11) Even if you have large group teachings or videos, you may break out into small groups afterwards to discuss the material. Counting off works well here.
- (12) When a small group becomes too large (more than 12), multiply and start a new group. A once-a-month reunion of the original group helps group members ease the pain of separation and continue the relationships they have formed while in their small groups. Sometimes the original group meets with its daughter groups for wider fellowship. This is also a great time to share new “best practices.”
- (13) Ideally, three to four people should join together to begin a new small group, serving as leader, co-leader, and contact person. This core team can begin rotating leadership right away, thus establishing rotating leadership and other best practices immediately. This eliminates having to go through the three stages of “convener,” “invisible,” to “among best friends” that a single person starting a small group will have to do.

## Glossary of Terms

**Accountability**--Submission to the counsel and oversight (but not control) of another person or group, with the willingness to be transparent and vulnerable in an environment of love and acceptance, for the purpose of becoming more obedient to God.

**Action Steps**--Steps used with accountability groups that are specific, observable, measurable, and that have a beginning and an end.

**Christian Small Group**-- A community of 6-10 (maximum 12) people who have willingly and purposefully gathered together to support one another, to help each other grow spiritually, to hear God, and to extend the Kingdom of God to a hurting world.

**Co-Leader**--An assistant from within the group, who supports the session leader, keeps time and prays silently for the group throughout the meeting.

**Confidentiality**--One of the rules of small groups whereby each group member agrees that nothing shared within the group will be discussed with anyone outside the group.

**Covenant**--A written or spoken agreement by members of the group that lists expectations, values, and behaviors for which they will hold themselves mutually accountable.

**Inductive Bible Study**—Looking at Scripture asking three questions: What does it say? What did it mean then? How does it apply to my life?

**Ice Breaker**--A brief activity at the beginning of the small group meeting used to welcome and include new members.

**Kujengana**--The Swahili word used in the Bible for “building up.” At the end of each small group session, each group member makes one positive, specific statement to the leader about his or her leadership of the meeting.

**Pairs**--The pairing up with another person within the group at certain times for a specific task. This works very well for introductions and checking Scripture memory. Also, use pairs for a quick discussion of a topic. It energizes the entire group.

**Servant Leadership**--One who follows Christ’s example of leadership through serving the group with an attitude of humility, acceptance, patience, transparency, and honesty.

**Small Group Leader's Rap**--A small group technique designed to help the leader deflect questions to other group members:

**“Good question!”**

**“I don't know.”**

**“What do you think?”**

**“What do you feel?”**

**Quads**--Breaking the small group into groups of 3 or 4 for prayers or a specific task.

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All of these principles and best practices have been used in the United States and cross culturally in Africa. None of them are new, but what we have learned is that the groups using them bond quickly, are extremely productive and work together with energy and excitement to see what God will unfold. We continue to learn, and there is always room for improvement. As you work in your small groups, we welcome your comments and suggestions to make our training and literature even more helpful. Let us know what “Best Practices” your group has discovered!

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