

# SMALL GROUPS

New Leader Guide



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Getting Started Checklist.....	3
Meeting Agenda .....	4
Covenant.....	5
Icebreakers for Acquaintances.....	6
Icebreakers for Deeper Friends .....	7
Prayer Ideas .....	8
Sharing Faith #1 .....	10
Sharing Faith #2 .....	12
Asking Stimulating Questions.....	14
Handling Conflict .....	15
Managing Group Detours .....	17
Answering Tough Questions .....	19

## RESOURCES

---

Visit [sov.church/groups/leaders](http://sov.church/groups/leaders) for more resources to help you lead your small group.

- Curriculum Ideas & Suggestions
- RightNow Media links and instructions
- myShepherd Leader Guide
- Sample covenants for Group Leaders & Members
- Prayer Ideas
- Icebreakers
- Small Group Health Plans
- Spiritual Health Assessments
- Articles on handling difficult people, asking stimulating questions, and more

# GETTING STARTED CHECKLIST

---

## *One Month Before Group Starts*

- Pray about who you might invite to your group, then ask them!
- Make sure your group information is correct in myShepherd.
- Order study materials for your group, or ask each group member to order their own.

## *One Week Before Group Starts*

- Contact group members to remind them of the upcoming meeting and provide details and directions.
- Begin planning for the first meeting.

## *First Meeting (see suggested agenda on reverse side)*

- Pray before group members arrive.
- Make the first meeting fun and mostly social. Have everyone introduce themselves and share a little about their family, where they live, their work, and any interests.
- Begin with a couple of lighthearted icebreakers.
- Discuss the group covenant.
- Ask someone to record who will bring treats, or use myShepherd to request members to volunteer to bring treats.
- Explain how to use myShepherd for group communication and contact information. Encourage everyone to get a login and password for myShepherd.
- You may or may not do a lesson at the first meeting.

## *First Month*

- Continually pray for each group member and the group as a whole.
- Connect between meetings (at services, by email, text or card, or meet for coffee).
- Invite group members to 'own' pieces of the group management (facilitate discussion, record prayer requests, host a group meeting, bring treats, etc.)
- Ask a group member to plan a group social or service event.
- Connect with your Small Group Leader Mentor/Shepherd.

## *Second Month*

- Continue doing the activities suggested for the first month.
- Begin discussing the group's next step. Will you continue to meet? What would you like to study next? Who can help organize and facilitate the group?

## *Third Month*

- Continue doing the activities suggested for the first month.
- Enjoy the social event or service project planned for your group.
- Finalize meeting details and materials for your next study.

# MEETING AGENDA

---

- Pray before each meeting.
- You may choose to begin or end your meeting time with some refreshments and casual socializing.
- Begin on time with an opening prayer.
- Use icebreakers to get the group talking. You may want to do a couple icebreakers the first few weeks that the group meets. This allows people to get to know each other and feel more comfortable sharing.
- Review the covenant (first meeting of each new study).
- Confirm group member contact information (first meeting of each new study).
- Give overview of study materials and lesson schedule (first meeting of each new study).
- Discuss the lesson.
- Share prayer requests.
- Close with a prayer.

# COVENANT

---

A covenant helps you discuss and clarify your group's goals, expectations and commitments. It provides a foundation for creating community, building trust, and encouraging open sharing. Such guidelines help a group stay healthy.

The covenant should be discussed, modified as needed, and agreed upon by the group at the start of the session. It is good to revisit the covenant mid-session too, or if any issues arise. (Take the covenant out, read through each point, and ask, "How are we doing on this?")

**Confidentiality** – I will keep what is shared in the group confidential (unless permission to share it is given)

**Time** – I will be mindful of starting and ending times, and will respect and use wisely the time we have together.

**Prayer** – I will pray for/with the group as I feel comfortable.

**Commitment** – I will make our group and our meeting a priority, and will do my best to come prepared.

**Attendance** – I will make every attempt to attend regularly and notify someone if I will be absent. If I decide to leave the group, I will tell the group in advance

**Acceptance** – I will be accepting of others and avoid judging.

**Listening** – I will listen to others without offering unsolicited advice.

**Participation** – I will participate, but not dominate.

**Balance** – I will strive for a balance between discussion of the study and life application, without getting overly sidetracked by personal issues.

**Honesty** – I will be open and honest with the group, as I am comfortable.

**Accountability** – I will support others in keeping commitments to God and others.

**Other Agendas** – Our small group is not meant for counseling, soliciting financial needs, seeking clients or business, or promoting political issues/candidates.

# ICEBREAKERS FOR ACQUAINTANCES

---

Icebreakers serve multiple purposes. They help us get to know and relate to one another. They level the playing field by giving every person the chance to warm-up and get in the game by saying something. They can be fun and light-hearted or more serious. They can also directly lead the group into the discussion topic at hand.

As the leader, you can encourage everyone to participate, as they feel comfortable, and to keep it short. Then, lead the way!

What was your favorite breakfast as a kid?

If you could invite anyone, living or dead, to dinner, who would it be and why?

Tell us about your first job. How old were you and what were you doing?

Did you have a favorite pet growing up? Why?

How did you get to school in the 5th grade?

What was your first car and how did you acquire it?

Describe your ideal vacation. Who would be there, where would you go, and what would you do?

Share something you remember from your childhood home.

Tell us something about yourself that we would be surprised to know.

What was your favorite summer activity when you were grade-school age?

As a child, did you have a favorite relative that you liked to visit? What made those visits so enjoyable?

Tell us about a hobby or activity that you enjoy so much that it is easy to lose track of time.

If you could be invisible for one hour, what would you do?

If you could wish one thing to come true this year, what would it be?

Where is your favorite place and what makes it special?

If you took tomorrow off from work or usual duties, what would you do?

What subject did you most dislike in school? Which did you love?

What did you do with some of your spare time this week?

Do you (or did you) have a nickname?

Who was your best friend from elementary school?

What talent do you wish you had and why?

What is your favorite season of the year? Why?

Describe your family dinner table when you were in elementary school? Who was there? Where did they sit?

What is your favorite room in your home? Why?

If money was no object, what present would you give to someone special?

# ICEBREAKERS FOR DEEPER FRIENDS

---

Have you ever had a recurring dream? What was it?

Did you have a fear as a child? What was it?

One thing I have learned about myself in the last year is....

What do you consider your greatest strength?

Tell about a person in your life who shaped who you are today.

Who was the best (or worst) role model you have had?

Describe a significant loss you have experienced and how you reacted.

Describe where you go and what you do to bring calm or peace to your life.

Name one thing you want your loved ones to remember you for.

Have you ever had to make a difficult decision and how did you go about it?

Is there something about you that drives your partner or friends crazy? Are you willing to share what that is?

What makes you laugh really hard?

Who has made the biggest spiritual impact on you?

What miracle do you wish God would perform right now?

Describe a time you were scared or afraid.

Describe a time when you felt God's presence.

In your family who did you go to when you got into trouble?

How did you meet your spouse?

Tell about the best job you have had in your work history.

Tell us about the church/faith experience you had while growing up.

What is the nicest thing someone has done for you?

Who was a strong influence in your life other than your parents?

What has been your biggest obstacle to spiritual growth?

If someone were to come up to you on the street and ask if you have been "saved" what would your response be?

\_\_\_\_\_ is the person in my life that I can always count on.

## **Additional Resources:**

- The Complete Book of Questions: 1001 Conversation Starters for Any Occasion (Gary Poole)
- 250 Big Ideas for Purpose Driven Small Groups (Steve Gladen and Lance Witt)
- Leader Webpage [sov.church/groups/leaders](http://sov.church/groups/leaders)

## PRAYER IDEAS

---

There is not a “right” way to lead your small group prayer time. In fact, there are many different approaches. We encourage you to use a variety of methods from week to week to keep things fresh.

One person closes in prayer for the entire group.

Pray immediately as a need surfaces during the small group time. Why wait until the end?

Have group members write prayer requests on a 3x5 card, then exchange with someone else in the group.

After a group member’s prayer request is shared, allow other members offer to be the pray-er for that request by saying, “I’ll pray for that!” Be sure all group members have a pray-er for their request.

Review prayer requests and answers from previous weeks.

Set a “theme” for prayer requests ... sharing faith, praise, areas of temptation, etc.

Ask group members to pray for the person on their left as you go around the circle clockwise. Be sure everyone feels comfortable praying aloud.

Pair up and pray for each other.

Popcorn prayers. The leader opens and closes the prayer. In between, members can “pop” in short praises or things they are thankful for, speaking in a random manner, like popping corn.

Encourage group members to pray in a variety of postures ... standing, kneeling, holding hands, palms up, walking, etc.

Instruct everyone to share one praise and one request.

Follow a pattern for prayer ... i.e. P.R.A.Y. (Praise, Repent, Ask for others, You) or A.C.T.S. (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication)

Pray “Korean-style” by having everyone pray audibly at the same time.

Connect your prayer time with your lesson. Limit prayer requests to direct application of your Bible study.

Have a group member journal the requests and email the requests to the group.

Pray one-sentence prayers.

Everyone who wants to pray takes a turn. Not everyone needs to pray aloud. Some may offer their prayer silently if preferred.

Split the group in half and pray together in a smaller group.

Pray silently. Have one person close the silent prayer time after a period of time with “Amen.”

You (or another member) prays out loud for each person in the group.

Additional prayer ideas can be found on the Leader Webpage at [sov.church/groups/leaders](http://sov.church/groups/leaders).



## Prayer Request Form

*Write down any prayer request you may have under each category below. Then exchange requests with a partner, or among the group. Pray for the person/request you receive, either in the group prayer, or throughout the week.*

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

This request ***should not*** / ***can*** be prayed out loud with the group. (circle one)

1. Spiritual (for example, what God is teaching you lately, quiet time, relationship w/ Jesus)
2. Relational (friendships, small group, or family relationships)
3. Personal (issues occupying your time & energy, recent struggles or successes)

## Prayer Request Form

*Write down any prayer request you may have under each category below. Then exchange requests with a partner, or among the group. Pray for the person/request you receive, either in the group prayer, or throughout the week.*

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

This request ***should not*** / ***can*** be prayed out loud with the group. (circle one)

1. Spiritual (for example, what God is teaching you lately, quiet time, relationship w/ Jesus)
2. Relational (friendships, small group, or family relationships)
3. Personal (issues occupying your time & energy, recent struggles or successes)

# SHARING FAITH #1

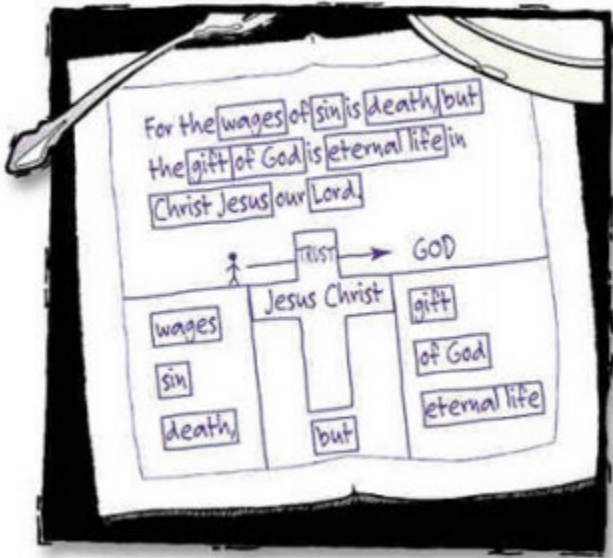
## Sharing Christ with the Bridge Illustration<sup>1</sup>

Successful evangelism is simply sharing the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Techniques do not bring people to Christ, the Holy Spirit does. Pray that God would open hearts<sup>54343</sup> to His good news.

Use a kickoff question before you begin sharing the illustration:

- If you were to die today and you were standing before God and He asked you, “Why should I let you into Heaven?” what would you say?
- If a friend at work asked you how to become a Christian, what would you tell him?
- On a scale of 0% to 100%, how sure are you about going to Heaven?

Smile, relax, and remember that what you are sharing is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. It's good news!



Many people feel that to be effective in evangelism they must memorize a complex illustration and a multitude of verses. But the Gospel is most powerful when shared with love, clarity, and simplicity.

One-Verse Evangelism is a simple, interactive way to share Christ's love conversationally and visually. It is based on asking questions and sharing. It's easy to learn because it uses just one verse. One-Verse Evangelism is also sensitive to peoples' busy schedules because it can be shared in just 10 or 15 minutes.

Here's a brief look at how it works. Let's say God's leading you to share the Gospel with a friend, Jeff. Write out Romans 6:23 on a piece of paper or a napkin: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (NIV). Then put your Bible away. Ask him/her if they would like to see a simple picture based on this verse that will explain God's relationship with people.

Circle the word **WAGES** and ask, “How would you feel if your boss refused to pay you the wages that were due to you?” Deep down, we all know that it is only right that we get what we deserve. Similarly, we earn wages from God for how we have lived our lives.

Draw a circle around **SIN**, asking your friend what he thinks when he hears this word. You might explain that sin is more an attitude than an action. It can be either actively fighting God or merely excluding Him from our lives. You can ask, “Has God ever seemed far away?” If he says “Yes,” add that that's one of the things sin does-it makes God seem far away. Now draw two opposing cliffs with a gap in between.

Circle the word **DEATH** and ask what thoughts come to mind. Explain that death in the Bible always means some kind of separation.

While circling the word **BUT**, mention that it is important because it means that a sharp contrast in thought is coming. What we have just looked at is bad news; what follows is good news.

Draw a circle around the word **GIFT**. Ask, “If wages are what a person earns, then what is a gift?” Remind your friend that someone must purchase every gift.

Circle **OF GOD** and explain that the gift you are talking about is free. It is from God Himself. It's so special that no one else can give it. Ask, “How do you feel when someone gives you a special gift?”

Circle the words **ETERNAL LIFE** next, and then ask, “How would you define these words?” Contrast one side of the cliff, death, with the other side, eternal life. Ask, “What is the opposite of separation from God?”

Draw the words **JESUS CHRIST** so they create a bridge between the two cliffs. Help your friend to consider that every gift has a giver, and only Jesus Christ can give the gift of eternal life.

Write **TRUST** over the bridge you just drew. Explain that friends trust each other, and tell your friend that Jesus wants a trusting friendship with him. All he has to do is admit that he is responsible for the “sin” of either fighting or excluding God from his life. That is what trust means-trusting that Jesus wants to forgive us for rejecting Him from our lives. At this point, you can ask him if he wants to start a relationship with God that will last forever. If he says “Yes,” invite him to pray a short prayer in his own words, asking Jesus to forgive him.

<sup>1</sup> How to Share Christ's Love Conversationally & Visually by Randy D. Raysbrook

## How to Receive Christ<sup>2</sup>

1. Admit your need (acknowledge, “I am a sinner”).
2. Be willing to turn from your sins (repent).
3. Believe that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross and rose from the grave.
4. Through prayer, invite Jesus Christ to come in and rule your life through the Holy Spirit (and receive him as Lord and Savior of your life).

Dear Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner and need your forgiveness. I believe that you died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite you to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow you as the Lord and Saviour of my life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

<sup>2</sup> From Sharing Your Life Mission Everyday © 2002 The Navigators

## SHARING FAITH #2

---

### *Do vs. Done!*

This is the most simple and succinct tool I know for telling others about Christ. It gets right to the heart of the issue so many people are confused about. That is, it addresses the question of what part our own efforts play in attaining God's salvation.

Since this illustration is verbal, without need for any props or visual aids, it's a good one to use in ordinary conversations, including talks on the telephone.

It is also great for times when you know you've got to say it cleanly and quickly - like when you're on a ladder, halfway between a sailboat and a dinghy, looking up at a handful of slightly inebriated seekers! That's what I tried to do on that occasion.

"Well, first you've got to realize the difference between religion and Christianity," I started. "Religion is spelled 'D-O,' because it consists of the things people *do* to try to somehow gain God's forgiveness and favor.

"But the problem is that you never know when you've done enough. It's like being a salesman who knows he must meet a quota but never being told what it is. You can never be sure that you've actually done enough.

Worse yet, the Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that we **never** can do enough. We'll always fall short of God's perfect standard.

"But thankfully," I went on, "Christianity is spelled differently. It's spelled 'D-O-N-E,' which means that what we could never do ourselves, Christ has already done for us. He lived the perfect life we could never live, and He willingly died on the cross to pay the penalty we owed for the wrongs we've done.

"To become a real Christian is to humbly receive God's gift of forgiveness and to commit to following His leadership. When we do that, He adopts us into His family, and begins to change us from the inside out."

I was glad to have such a concise tool as the "Do vs. Done" illustration. Let me encourage you to master it as well. It's easy to learn, yet it's very effective as a tool to help people understand the central tenets of the Christian faith, especially those who think they can get to heaven by being good enough.

### *The Roman Road!*

This is one of the most effective presentations for people who've heard the message but need to see it in black and white, right out of the pages of the Bible. It's based on three verses in the book of Romans. I'd suggest underlining these in your Bible so that they're easy to find and show to others.

The first verse to show your friend is Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." I explain, "According to this, all of us have sinned against God. This includes not only big sins, like rape and murder, but also stuff like the moral missteps, lies, cruelty, insensitivity toward others, losing your temper, cheating, and self-centeredness. I'm willing to admit to some of these. How about you?" Most people have no trouble admitting they've done these things, too.

Then I turn to the second verse, Romans 6:23, and let them read, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I’ll say, “According to this verse, those little wrongdoings you and I just admitted to have earned us a penalty. The penalty is death.”

But then I’ll draw attention to the second half of the verse, and say, “It refers here to a gift. God has offered us a gift of eternal life. We can freely receive God’s forgiveness and His pardon from the death penalty that we owed. The penalty has been paid for by Jesus’ death on the cross. And like any other gift, we can’t earn it, we can only receive it. To find out how, let’s turn to one more verse.” And then I’ll let the person read Romans 10:13, where it says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

“Do you see how simple it is to receive God’s gift? All we have to do is recognize the fact that we’ve sinned and deserve death, and then call out to God humbly for His forgiveness and the new life He’s offering us. That’s what I did a few years back, and I’d like to encourage you to do the same.”

<sup>1</sup> From [Becoming a Contagious Christian](#) by Bill Hybles and Mark Mittleberg

## ASKING STIMULATING QUESTIONS

---

Sure there are questions in your study guide, but how can you go beyond those questions to create more stimulating discussion? Preparing the right questions before your meeting can encourage deeper sharing and greater transformation. The passage John 3:16 is used below to demonstrate ways to make discussion more lively and dynamic.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

- Closed questions are not taboo. They are great for understanding the bible, one purpose of small groups, The question “How did God demonstrate his love for us?” may lead to better understanding of the passage. Prepare to help interpret the passage. Being able to discuss the word *agape* could open more discussion when you ask “What kind of love did God demonstrate”.
- Begin the meeting by explaining the general context and meaning of the passage or lesson being studied. Closed questions work well to ensure members have a good base from which to answer questions.
- Open-ended questions invite members to share their heart and apply the study to their life. Questions to consider are “How did you come to know God loves you? Did someone talk to you about God? How do you see God showing you His love today?”
- Be sure members apply the lesson to their lives. Ask questions like “How did God use this passage to speak to you? How do you think He wants you to use this in your life, or in the groups life?”
- Ask questions that aim at transformation. Follow-up on the previous lesson by asking members to “Share an experience since we last met that showed sacrificial love”. If you begin each lesson by asking how people acted on the previous lesson, group members will look for ways to apply the lesson.
- Don't expect to answer all the study guide questions. Decide ahead of time which questions you want to be sure to cover. Asking too many questions that spark little meaningful discussion can result in limited time for closing prayer, extroverts dominating the meeting, and some members reluctant to return.

The payoff for the time taken to prepare great questions will be a well-knit group with unlimited potential.

Adapted from “How to Ask Stimulation Discussion Questions by Joel Comiskey

[www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/howtoaskquestions.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/smallgroups/articles/howtoaskquestions.html)

# HANDLING CONFLICT

---

by Robert Damon

Adopt the following saying: “Conflict is expected and welcome!”

Imagine a home with a sign on the front door, “Conflict is Expected and Welcome!” Most of us would panic when we saw that sign, especially if it was the location where a small group was meeting.

We live by the maxim, “Avoid conflict at all costs.” But conflict and disagreement will happen no matter what you do or how well you do. Someone once said, “The course of truth never does run smooth.”

Let me suggest a new understanding for the church just starting small groups (and all the others): “Conflict is expected and welcome!” Conflict will happen, and what you make of it—positive or negative—will have a lasting impression.

Conflict in a smaller church is a more obvious and visible element to deal with; disagreement between two families can be felt church-wide and even community-wide. In a larger church setting, conflict remains part of ministry but doesn't always bring the church to crisis. In either setting, the conflict must be handled.

From the rural church with 25 people to the inner-city church with 500 or more to the mega-church of thousands, there are ample areas for conflict that will arise in a small group setting. There is style of leadership, content of the study, focus or purpose of the group, personalities, details such as meeting times and location, and more. Aside from all that, we should acknowledge that outside of specific *areas* of conflict, there are also *people of conflict*—people who simply thrive on stirring up trouble.

There are some basic principles for handling conflict in a small group.

- Churches and groups must learn to acknowledge and address conflict directly and immediately. Don't ignore it. Don't run from it. Make it work for the good of the Kingdom.

You and I have been in situations where conflict has started. And one common solution is to ignore it or work around it, hoping that eventually the conflict will dissolve or the people will get involved with something else. Another response is to “turn tail and run.” One man actually changed groups on a regular basis simply to avoid getting personal and getting into conflict. When the behavior was addressed, he left the church for another congregation. These avoidance methods simply take up time and energy and do not resolve the issues or foster any kind of growth.

Please know that your response as a leader will have a strong influence on how the conflict and resolution is perceived by the entire group. If you positively welcome the conflict and potential outcome, the results can be uplifting; if you negatively avoid conflict, the results can be deadly for the group.

- Include only those who are immediately affected. People love to involve and be involved. But there are some disagreements that don't need to see the light of day in a group; deal “off-line” with the person or persons concerned. Admittedly, there are times when the entire group should be involved in the problem-solving. But try to keep it controlled and resolution-focused, with only those people that need to be restored in relationship.
- Always seek a possible solution while in the midst of discussion. Roll up your sleeves with those involved to positively work through the conflict together. Experience is a great resource in resolving issues, and yours or another group member's history and willingness to share help facilitate some great

possibilities for problem-solving. The group as a whole can use its collective wisdom to reach a solution, but the key is having the conflict in the open and in discussion.

- Prayer is the primary way to handle conflict in a group. As we pray—either alone or as a group—usually the self becomes secondary and God is primary. He will soften hearts; he will bring people together; he will provide the focus.

There can be some positive results of conflict for the small group. First, conflict can help pin-point areas of needed change. Second, as ministry continues to grow and change, conflict can help focus direction and energy for the good.

William D. Hendricks has written a book, *Exit Interviews* (Moody Press), about church members who leave. I have conducted exit interviews with people leaving small groups and with group leaders who quit. Those insights have been incorporated into the structure and philosophy of groups. This has been a wonderful resource, and one of the best methods of turning potentially negative conflict into positive results.

Just as real, there are negative results of conflict. Conflict can cause division in a group, ministry, or church. It can also be a distraction, focusing time and energy on the surface or negative issues rather than on the issues of salvation and ministry. It is easier to focus on the color of the pews than to focus on why we can see the color because the pews are empty.

One new group had survived the birthing process, but was a little wounded and worn. They began to heal, and they began to grow. This group grew so much that even after their own birth of another group, the original small group was still quite large. That was when conflict started to surface: several dominant and needy people were expressing themselves, the leaders were more like cattle herders than shepherds, and the group was approaching meltdown.

After several group members began to complain to each other and the group leaders were complaining to me, I suggested a novel approach: talk about it with the entire group.

Interesting results are now coming to the surface. The group is working to resolve child-care issues, apprenticing and new leader issues, leader burn-out issues—all these points of potential conflict are open within the group, and the group as a whole is turning this into positive growth and renewal for the group.

Encountering Jesus Christ in small group settings is a time-tested and life-changing truth. As mentioned earlier, that course never does run smooth. Unresolved and avoided conflict and overall ignorance of the dynamics in groups will damage and harm the potential effort for the Kingdom. Honestly approaching conflict, sometimes painfully open as it may be, will reap positive results and further the ministry.

“Conflict is expected and welcome!” Care to hang that on your door?



# MANAGING GROUP DETOURS

---

A small group leader's job is to facilitate the group process, that is, to ensure that the direction and purpose of the group are being met. Ideally, the group should be a mixture of structured and process-and-experience learning. Sometimes that can become unbalanced when group members start taking detours from the discussion of the study. This could either be a change in subject or dominating discussion. Sometimes these detours are healthy and necessary when members are struggling with an issue. Allowing the member to process the issue and gain the support and prayer of the group is consistent with the purpose of the group. However, if detours are frequent and/or unrelated to the study, it may become detrimental to the group's process and purpose.

So, what should a leader do if this situation occurs? In order to effectively deal with the situation, the leader(s) should try to identify the reason WHY a member(s) is taking the detour. Understanding how to get the member(s) back on the right path will then become clearer. Often there is not just one reason why someone is taking the conversation off course, nor is there only one way to respond to the situation.

Below is a list of some of the reasons group members take detours, along with some helpful hints on how to help the group stay focused on where it is going.

## **1. Group member(s) fail to complete the homework assignments.**

- If preparation for group meetings is in your covenant, review the covenant with the group and remind them of the commitment agreed upon.
- If group member(s) repeatedly make comments during group time about not having completed the homework, you can say something like “Anne, you've mentioned a few times your inability to complete your homework. Is there something that is preventing you from doing it, and if so, how can we be praying for you so you can get it done?”
- If a group member repeatedly doesn't complete the homework, but doesn't bring it up in group, take time outside the group to address the issue. You could say “Anne, I don't think you are aware of it, but when you don't do your homework, it is difficult for you to keep to the discussion about the study. Is there something that is preventing you from doing it, and if so, how can we be praying for you so you can get it done?”

## **2. Group member(s) are afraid of silence and/or don't know when to stop talking.**

- Model for the group the art of being quiet. Resist the urge to answer a question and even allow questions to be unanswered.
- When group member(s) go on talking and talking, you could:
  - Suggest that the group pause and pray for that person right now.
  - Try to bring the focus to the issue so that the group can pray for and support that member. For example, the leader could say “Anne, I'm hearing you say that you are having a hard time telling the truth to the person, is that correct?” Then you can add it to your prayer requests.
  - Allow the Holy Spirit to find the connection between the detour topic and the study. For example, say a study is about the power of the tongue and suddenly the group is discussing movies they have seen. The leader could say something like “Movies are a good example about the power of the tongue. I find myself sometimes repeating lines from the movies, even know that they are not what God would want my tongue to be saying.”

### **3. Group member(s) are insecure and talking makes them feel like a good person.**

- Use the suggestions from the attached document “Affirmations” to create a supportive and affirming community for the group member.

### **4. Group members are people. They love to hear themselves talk.**

- Bring attention to the detour, even light-heartedly. For example, the leader could say “I notice we were talking about miracles and the subject changed to cooking. Why do you think that happened?”
- If a group member(s) who is sharing their experience is cut-off by another group member telling a “me too” story, a leader can say something like “I know we have all had similar experiences to Anne's. Anne, can you tell us more about *your* circumstances?”
- Have an object that can be held. Allow ONLY the person who is holding the ball to talk.

### **5. Group members are people. They naturally want to give others advice.**

- If advice-giving is prohibited in your covenant, review the covenant with the group and remind them of the commitment agreed upon.
- A group leader can discourage advice-giving in the group by saying something like “There are a lot of good ideas mentioned here, and probably so many other ways to address this problem. But let's use the group time to talk more about the issue, and if Anne wants suggestions on how to handle the situation, she can talk to us outside of the group.”

### **6. Group member(s) fear the discussion going deeper than their comfort level.**

- Identify if it is the group member who fears going deeper, or is the group somehow preventing the group member from going deeper.
- If it is the group member that fears going deeper, use the suggestions from the attached document “Leading Your Group to Deeper Sharing” to encourage greater sharing. In addition, spend some time with the group member(s), trying to get to know them and understand the possible reason for the fear of going deeper.
- If it is the group that is the reason a group member from going deeper, identify what is happening to prevent that member from sharing. Is it:
  - *lack of confidentiality?* Again, review the covenant regarding the group's commitment to confidentiality. Encourage the group member to share with the group how that breach of confidence felt and effected sharing.
  - *group size?* Break into smaller groups of 3-6 people to allow a safer environment and provide more 'air-time' for the group member.
  - *lack of community?* Take time outside the group to get to know each other. This will help the group to bond and create a level of trust.
  - *too much 'spiritualization'?* Sometimes too much 'God talk' or 'Scripture talk' can have a negative effect on group members, preventing them from feeling and processing what they are going through. It can also intimidate group member(s), making them spiritually inferior to the other group members. In the group, the leader may say something like “Thanks for sharing that. Anne, can you tell us more about how you are feeling? Outside of the group, it may be helpful to talk with the group member(s) that are 'spiritualizing' too much. Remind them that their depth of knowledge of scripture is helpful and commendable. Make them aware, however, of the effects of introducing too much of it can be on another member who is struggling.

# ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS

---

## Why Is Life So Unfair?

*Innocent and good people suffer. What kind of God would allow that?*

Isaiah 55:8–9; Joel 2:25–27

### **An Unjust World (It's Not an Illusion)**

Life is unfair. Sometimes the innocent are murdered, and the murderer is protected. Situations like these give rise to questions: What is right in a world where little children die and genocidal despots live in luxury? Where hard-working men go bankrupt and swindlers go on swindling? Where all the wrong people, it seems, suffer?

In Genesis 4, Abel experienced injustice when he was murdered. How could this happen? He, according to Hebrews 11, was the one who pleased God. He had faith; Cain didn't. In fact, how is it that so many models of faith in Hebrews 11 were the victims of murder?

Surely the saints of Hebrews 11 carried within themselves a keen sense of life's unfairness. "Some faced jeers and flogging... others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawed in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, mistreated. ...They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:36–39).

Abel did the right thing. God loved Abel. God accepted Abel. God showed favor to Abel. But that favor was expressed only in accepting Abel's gift. It was not expressed in protection. In fact, God provides far more protection to Cain than he ever did to Abel. He marked Cain to keep at bay the avengers. Aren't things supposed to go well for those who please the Lord?

### **An Unsafe God (Is What We Want)**

God's definition of life going well is unique, distinct. His definition of wellness is not about health or finances. It's not even about protection. It's not at all about life being fair.

It's about acceptance. It's about God accepting us as his own. It's not about being spared from untimely or difficult death. It's about being spared the "second death"—the death of unbridgeable separation, the death that is oblivion and torment and unending aloneness.

Because of Jesus Christ, we have received God's *unmerited* favor. God doesn't make the injustices of life vanish. He redeems them—their unfairness, their brokenness, their disease and death—and he gives us back sevenfold all the years the locusts have eaten.

Ultimately, we are citizens of heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there. But meanwhile, we walk by faith and not by sight. Meanwhile those who walk by faith discover that life rarely gets easier. It often gets harder. Safe? Who said God was safe? Fair? Who said God was fair? The Bible doesn't.

—MARK BUCHANAN; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2001 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net).

## Why Does God Allow Abuse?

*How one leader navigated this difficult terrain.*

Psalm 27:10

*A tough question can come at any time and can take an unexpected angle. This is the story of how one pastor dealt with such a question and responded with honesty while avoiding the temptation of the pat, easy answer.*

### **Crash Course in Dealing With Evil**

A woman in her early thirties who had attended worship several Sundays in a row stayed around after the service. She walked up to me and asked in a desperate tone, “Can we talk . . . right now?”

We sat in a pew, and she began to tremble, but she came to the point: “I usually don’t come to church. I have a hard time with God.” She paused to catch her breath.

My father and my uncle molested me all through my childhood until I moved out and joined the army. How could God allow that?”

She said it that quickly and that bluntly. At which point she crumpled and began to cry. Soon she looked up at me. She waited for my answer.

I gave her the only answer I know: “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t know?’ “ she retorted with an edge of anger.

“I know it doesn’t sound like much of an answer,” I said, “but the reason I say that I don’t know why things like that happen is that I really don’t know. I don’t know why God does what he does, or why he allows what he allows, or why bad things happen at all. God doesn’t tell me. I really don’t know.

“I don’t have a lot of answers for this kind of stuff, but I can tell you this—I believe you. I believe every word you’ve told me. I know that God honors your honesty. And who knows, maybe, with time, love, and prayer, you can receive some healing for all this.”

### **What You Need To Know**

In pastoral care we have two choices: we can bring God to people, or we can play God with people. I have learned I don’t need to answer people’s questions so much as I need to bring the answer to them in the form of compassion.

Theological honesty is a form of compassion with power to soothe. As I spoke to her, I thought about how much I really do believe in God’s providence in our lives. But just because I believe God is sovereign doesn’t mean I have the slightest idea why things happen, or how or why he allows things to happen.

To respond blithely that God didn’t have anything to do with her situation, that somehow stuff like this just happens by chance or is caused by the devil and that God doesn’t have any say in the matter at all, would have failed her grievously. It would have been tantamount to saying that God does not exist. The problem of evil is incomprehensible, but it is not insoluble; compassion dissolves it.

—DAVID HANSEN; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

## Why Doesn't God Always Cure Those Who Pray?

*Because he is in control, a cure for illness isn't beyond his power.*

2 Samuel 12:15–20

This is a question that arises in our darkest hours—in the hospital ward, in the doctor's office, when the unfavorable test results return. Our need often arises unexpectedly and then consumes us.

Embedded in the question are two key assumptions. First, that ours is a God of miracles, including healing. And second, that believers are instructed to pray fervently.

A quick evaluation of Scripture attests that miracles display God's power (Jer. 10:12), arouse wonder (Ex. 4:21), and function as a sign to confirm his message (Matt. 12:39-40). We also are commanded to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) because habitual prayers express dependence on God. And as little children, we anticipate "good things" from our heavenly Father (Matt. 7:11). Yet three additional points are critical.

*1. God does not always respond to our desires, and he frequently allows circumstances we wish he would not.* Theologically we call this sovereignty. Inherent in our faith is the scriptural truth that God is in control. And yet God repeatedly chooses to veil the ways in which he exercises his right to control circumstances. Hence our requests will not always coincide with God's response.

*2. Our tendency is to doubt God's sovereignty in the midst of tumultuous times.* Unfortunately, when we doubt we presume to comprehend more than he does. Instead, the nature of our faith is to be "certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). While the world looks for proof in signs and wonders, we should never forget that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). It is in this power that he asks us to trust in him.

*3. We must embrace the sufficiency of God's grace in all circumstances.* In other words, it is imperative that the God of the mountaintop also be the God of the valley. The apostle Paul requested three times to be healed of his "thorn in the flesh." The response from the Lord? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The sufficiency of God's grace is found in that we can endure suffering just as Jesus endured the Cross!

So we are left with this: We do not know why God allows one to be healed and others not. We have all been touched by situations where God did not heal despite the faithful prayers of his people. The words of Alister McGrath in *Mystery of the Cross* (Zondervan, 1990) are well posed:

As with the Cross, our darkest hour may be God's finest moment. It may be there that he does his greatest work—albeit unseen to us. Thus instead of letting circumstances consume us, we are to be consumed with God. To that end, we pray without ceasing, trust in his sovereignty, and find comfort in his hope.

—MARK M. YARBROUGH; adapted from our sister publication CHRISTIANITY TODAY, © 2006 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com).

## Where is God in Suffering?

*The better question is: where are you?*

Job 2:9–13

For Christians in the midst of a crisis, the primary focus should not be assigning blame but being salt and light. Beyond practical help, there are two particularly pressing questions of faith. The first is, “How could God let such horrid things happen?” The second, “How could we let such horrid things happen?”

Both of these questions deal with theodicy: Why does God allow evil to exist? Can’t God stop both human and natural evil? If he can, why doesn’t he? That these questions arise in every generation shows the enduring nature of our doubt and the magnitude of the question. Both “natural” evil (natural disasters, disease, suffering of animals) and “human” evil (wars, genocides, injustice) mock our ability to make the reality of an omnipotent, loving God sensible in the wake of suffering.

### **Is Human Sin God’s Design?**

With human evil, the explanation comes slightly easier: God allows us freedom; thus we are free to choose to do evil. Only by seeking and yearning for God’s will to be done in our lives can we begin to combat the evils of the world.

### **When Blame Cannot Suffice**

But even with the issue of human evil “settled,” the issue of “acts of God” remains. We can plausibly blame the evils of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot on Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. But who could be at fault for cancer or hurricanes or earthquakes but God? How does theodicy ultimately answer the question “Why is life unfair?”

As it was in the days of Job, it is wrong to assume that every illness or sudden misfortune must somehow be the fault of the sufferer. Affliction comes to those who don’t deserve it. There comes a point where the issue of blame simply must be left aside. Only then can we truly begin to serve those who are suffering.

John Stackhouse, summarizing what he calls “the challenge of evil,” notes the ultimate impossibility of understanding the plan of God. He argues that trust in God must come first, and only then can we begin to learn to accept his purposes. The inherently subjective and personal nature of the problem serves to keep us humble and avoid pat answers to explain away the pain of others.

In the end, he suggests that the question “Where is God when people suffer?” was best answered by Mother Teresa: “God is there, suffering with [them]. The question really is, where are you?”

—WILL REAVES; copyright 2005 by the author and Christianity Today International.

## Will That Person Be in Heaven?

*God isn't only going to forgive those we like. He might forgive some we hate.*

Luke 15:28–31

When my theologian-friend visits his elderly mother, he often ends up as a resident theologian for a small Cuban-immigrant community of her friends. “Is it possible,” one woman asked him, “for Castro to convert on his deathbed and end up in heaven?” “It is possible,” Professor Eire assured her. “This is what Christian faith is all about. Nobody is beyond the pale of redemption.” “Well, if that were to happen,” said the woman, “then I would not want to be in heaven.”

Most of us have our own “Castros” with whom we would rather not share the space of the world to come. Heaven with them, we imagine, would feel more like a forecourt of hell. But according to God’s plan for redemption, the not-loved ones will be transformed into the loved ones, and those who do not love will begin to do so. Enemies will become friends.

### **A Hard Teaching**

Heaven is more than just a fresh start. It is more than just the creation of a new future. It is also redemption of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—redemption of our whole lived life. Heaven is having had your messy pages made clean and right again. Since the majority of our sins are committed socially—against one another—it makes sense that in heaven our relationships will be restored. This is a necessary part of the transition from the world in which we live into the world that is to come.

### **More Than Words**

The divine judgment will reach its goal when, by the power of the Spirit, each person sets aside attempts at self-justification, acknowledges personal sin in its full magnitude, experiences liberation from the guilt and the power of sin, and recognizes that all others have done precisely that—given up on self-justification, acknowledged their sin, and experienced liberation.

Having recognized that others have changed—that they have been given their true identity by being freed from sin—one will no longer condemn others but offer them the grace of forgiveness. Beyond the simple utterance of “I forgive you,” this forgiveness is the kind of reconciliation in which former enemies move toward each other and embrace each other as belonging to the same communion of love.

### **Scandalous but Good**

Once, after a lecture on the Last Judgment and the Final Reconciliation, an African-American student approached me. “Do you know what you are saying?” she asked: Many masters of her enslaved ancestors were “good” Christians, and she may see them one day in heaven. “I know,” I responded, “and it is scandalous, isn’t it?” She—and I along with her—was troubled by the thought of the Final Reconciliation. “But if it were otherwise,” she said after a while, “heaven would not be heaven.”

—MIROSLAV VOLF; adapted from our sister publication *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, © 2000 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com).



**SHEPHERD**  
OF THE VALLEY

14107 Hudson Road South, Afton, Minnesota | 651.436.8248 | [sov.church](http://sov.church)