

How to Lead Small Group Ministry

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Introduction

Small group ministry should be considered an essential part of the church. It provides the personal element so often lacking in traditional church programs. Unfortunately, many people overlook it. Not that people oppose small groups (I was only able to find two sources that even mentioned opposition to small groups, and I was unable to locate any sources that oppose them outright), many people simply do not know how to lead small groups effectively. However, leading small groups really is not as complicated as some may imagine. This paper will attempt to present the most essential aspects of small group leadership.

The Need for Small Group Ministry

Definition of Small Group Ministry

Any discussion of small group ministry must begin with a working definition. Although the definition differs somewhat according to the group's purpose, all true small groups share certain characteristics. Small groups are "group[s] of people . . . who meet regularly for the purpose of spiritual edification and evangelistic outreach (with the goal of multiplication)."^[1] They should function as parts of a local church, not as independent entities.^[2] Comiskey lists several things small groups are not: They are not cliques, only once per week, merely neighborhood Bible studies or prayer groups, or separate from the church.^[3] Ott suggests the acronym "WIFE" as a description of the aspects of

small groups. It stands for "Worship, Instruction, Fellowship, and Expression."^[4]

Small groups are interactive. In traditional church functions, such as a typical worship service, prayer meeting, or adult Sabbath School program, teachers or preachers address the audience members, and if the audience members participate at all, they primarily communicate with the leader. However, every member of a small group communicates with every other member (see [Figure 1](#)).^[5] In fact, while Comiskey suggests that small groups should consist of 4-15 members^[6](groups should be small enough so that everyone can sit around a table),^[7] Johnson says that "the term *Small Group* refers more to the interpersonal dynamic than it does to the actual number of group members."^[8] This is the key to understanding small groups.

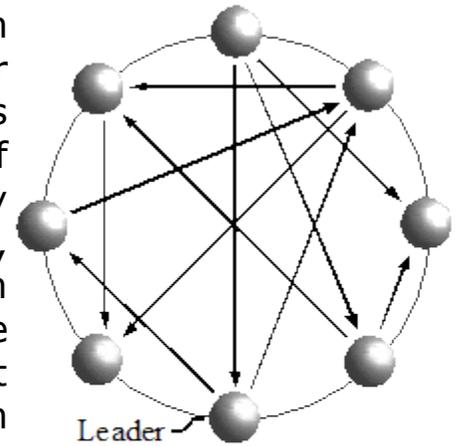


Figure 1. Lines of communication within a small group.
(Source: Johnson, *Outreach* 26)

Another aspect of small group ministry is that small groups are active throughout the week. For example, a small group might meet during Sabbath School, but the members should be in contact with each other during the week, doing the things that friends do. In the case of a small group that meets for Sabbath School, another weekly group meeting sometime during the week would be good. Ideally this meeting would take place in someone's home. Here at Southwestern Adventist University we have a small group program called In the Huddle; I lead one of the groups. I have noticed that my group has become much more effective since we instituted an outside-of-Sabbath-School meeting.

Because small group ministry differs significantly from other, more traditional ministry models, it should not be neglected. A healthy church consists not only of the worship service, in which all members worship together; and sub-organizations, such as the choir, Pathfinders, or the singles' program. It must include small groups.^[9]

History of Small Group Ministry

Small group ministry is a major ministry model of the New Testament. Jesus chose twelve disciples and spent one-on-one, interactive time with them. After He returned to heaven, the disciples established small groups of believers. The author of Luke describes the early church this way:

[The believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods,

they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.^[10]

This is a wonderful example of the small group ideal. Because Luke tells us that the believers ate together in homes, we know that the size of the groups was not great. Each group enjoyed community, prayer, and study. (At that time, the New Testament had not been written, so the groups studied the apostles' teachings, many of which have since become part of the New Testament. Today small groups should study the Bible.) Warren asserts that there are "five dimensions of church growth":

Churches	grow <i>warmer</i> through	fellowship
Churches	grow <i>deeper</i> through	discipleship
Churches	grow <i>stronger</i> through	worship
Churches	grow <i>broader</i> through	ministry
Churches	grow <i>larger</i> through evangelism ^[11]	

All five dimensions were present in the church of Acts and are still present in today's small groups.*

Later, small group movements sometimes accompanied periods of reform in the church. For example, in 1670 Philip Spener, who was a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt, Germany, organized what he called "cottage prayer meetings." These meetings were similar to today's small groups and were largely

Number of new friends in the church	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Active members	0	0	0	1	2	2	8	13	12	12
Drop-outs	8	13	14	8	4	2	1	0	0	0

Table 1. The Importance of New Friends in the Church (Source: Johnson 36)

Note: This table is based on interviewing 100 new church members—50 active and 50 inactive.

responsible for a major revival.^[12]

More recently, small groups have been revived once again in the Christian community. In 1900 White asserted that small groups should meet to study the Bible together, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and share testimonies.^[13] In an article published in January 2003, Becky Scoggins is quoted as saying that "new Christians who participate in small groups are more likely to remain church members."^[14] In order for church members to

stay in the church, they need at least seven friends in the church and at least one special friend.[15] [Table 1](#) shows that new members who make few friends in the church are likely to leave while those who make many friends will probably stay in the church. This is where small groups come in. They provide the friendship that traditional programs cannot as easily provide.

Important as small group ministry is, it should not be the church's only form of ministry. Many forms of ministry can have a valuable impact on the church—from preaching to Pathfinders to social programs—and each has its place in the church. Small groups are more personal and facilitate stronger relationships, but larger groups are more open to outsiders and have more resources available to help those in need. The church must have both.[16]

How to Conduct Small Group Ministry

With this background in mind, we will now focus on how to lead small groups. According to Ott, “a leader is someone who knows where he or she is going (a purpose) and has others going along with him (a people) on the way (a plan).”[17] Each group should also have an assistant leader. Not only do assistant leaders lead in the leaders' absence, they are in training to become leaders of new groups, and they can provide excellent feedback to their leaders.[18]

How to Prepare to Lead Small Groups

The most important part of being a small group leader is the spiritual prerequisite. Success depends on the time leaders spend in their personal daily devotions.[19] Johnson suggests spending one hour every day with God. Leaders should spend part of the hour praying and part of it studying the Bible study guide or Bible passage for the next meeting. They should also memorize at least one Bible promise per week about strength, soul-winning, faith, or power.[20]

How to Lead Small Groups

After beginning to fulfill the spiritual prerequisite, leaders need to decide what type of group they will lead. An open group has the widest range of potential members. It makes outsiders feel welcome and encourages group members to minister to others by inviting them to join the group. A major drawback for an open group is that it is much more difficult for group members to develop trust and intimacy. A closed group, on the other hand, is much more personal and intimate. It can also be a real benefit in developing accountability between members. Closed groups only allow people to join or leave at specified times. Closed groups need to minister to others outside the group or they risk becoming exclusive.[21]

The next task is to find a meeting location. Someone's home (as opposed to a church) would be ideal;[22] the meeting place can even rotate between different members' homes. Whatever the location, it needs to be comfortable, with adequate lighting and few distractions. The most important aspect of location is that the group *must* sit in a circle.[23] Sitting in a circle includes everyone and facilitates discussion. Finnell suggests that the group should not have anything to hide behind, such as a table. This, he says, encourages openness.[24]

Once a location has been chosen (or in some cases before choosing the location) leaders need to decide whom to include in the group. There are three basic choices: (1) hand-picked members, (2) those who respond to a public announcement, or (3) a combination of the first two choices.[25] Then leaders must begin to recruit members for the group. Regardless of who is to be in the group, personal invitations are a must. Printed fliers and other public announcements are a bonus, but without a personal invitation they are only marginally effective.[26] Leaders should concentrate on recruiting people they already know; these people are more likely to come than are total strangers.[27]

Another aspect of planning for a small group meeting is to determine the meeting format. Comiskey uses the formula *welcome, worship, word, and works* to describe the various parts of his group meetings. The welcome portion is to break the ice and help the people become comfortable with each other. It is not a formal agenda item; in fact, as the group members become better acquainted with each other the welcome portion of the meeting becomes very natural. The worship portion of the meeting focuses the group on God. It can include singing and prayer, or some other meaningful worship activity. Bible study is what happens during the word portion, and it should be the meat of the meeting. This paper will discuss the Bible study element later. Finally, the works section of the meeting is where the group focuses on outreach. An outreach program will be much more effective if the group regularly spends time talking about current outreach projects and planning for future outreach.[28]

Ott presents another model for group meetings: the "discipleship triangle" (see [Figure 2](#)). This model seeks to balance Bible study, prayer, and sharing in order to produce effective ministry. As the group members minister to each other through the three sides of the triangle, they will be empowered to minister to those outside the group as well.[29]

In the word section of the discipleship triangle, the group focuses on sharing insights, not on

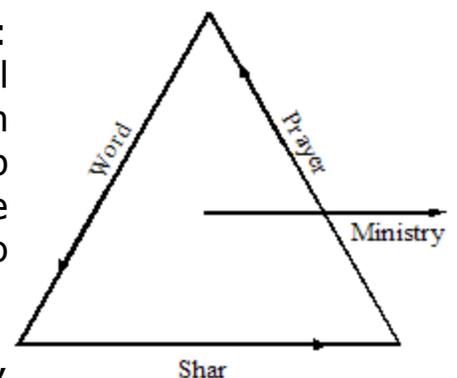


Figure 2. Discipleship Triangle (Source: Ott 139)

teaching per se. The group study is based on what the members have already studied. In addition, the leader should inquire about members' spiritual lives and goals during this phase.[30]

In the sharing section, group members share blessings and needs. The group should not go around the circle as that might put some members on the spot. The group should also refrain from giving advise for every need. Some problems are better dealt with outside the group setting.[31]

For the prayer section, the group should use conversational prayer[32] (or "popcorn prayer," as I like to call it). In conversational prayer, individual members offer short prayers without going around the circle or following any other sequence. Someone should be appointed to end the prayer when it seems like everyone is finished.

The group I lead follows a somewhat different program, which we frequently adjust in order to try out new techniques. Currently we begin with some sort of ice-breaker, which is usually light conversation before the meeting actually begins. Then we break off into twos and threes, sign each other off on our weekly memory texts, and pray with the smaller group (the group of two or three). Once everyone has finished praying, we have the Bible study itself. The Bible study occupies the majority of the meeting. When the time for the Bible study runs out, we have a group prayer (the way we do it varies every week) then make any plans that we need to make. So far I have not found a way to squeeze in a works section as Comiskey recommends.

During the meeting, leaders will primarily use one of two leadership methods: inductive and didactic (see Figure 3).[33] The

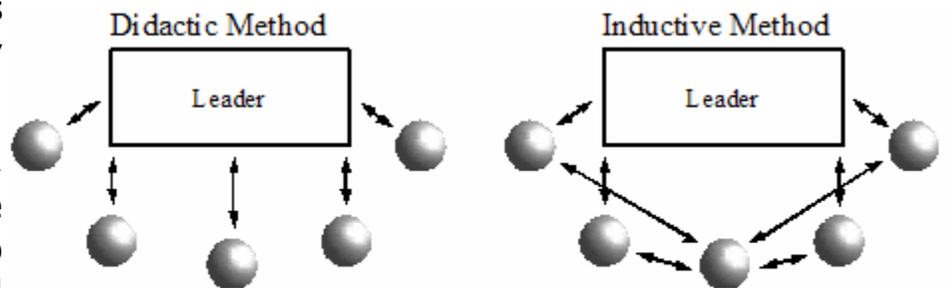


Figure 3. The Didactic Method Versus the Inductive Method. (Source: Johnson 43, 44)

method focuses on the leader; group members interact only with the leader. The inductive method is much better suited for small groups. In the inductive method, members interact with each other and learn together. They do not have to rely solely on the leader's knowledge. The leader's job is to help the members discover answers for themselves. Leaders can accomplish this by asking open-ended questions—questions that require more than a simple yes-or-no answer, thus stimulating discussion—and by being familiar with the subject themselves. Since in an inductive study leaders do not preach or teach, Comiskey suggests that leaders should only talk about thirty percent of the time.[34]

When leaders are ready to choose the topic for their groups to study, there are many options from which to choose. Some groups study the topic or Bible passage the pastor preached about in church after he preaches about it. This model has the advantage that the pastor can point out important details in his sermon and possibly even produce a worksheet for the groups to use. Another option is for the group to choose a book of the Bible to study through. When properly conducted, this method can generate many spiritual insights for the group members. This is the type of study I have used in my groups until recently. Yet another option is to go through a set of study guides as a group. All study guides are not alike, however; some are more suitable for small group use than others. Finally, the group can pick a topic and study it. Topics dealing with practical Christianity (how Christianity affects our day-to-day lives) are especially good for small group study. Johnson believes that while groups can start with practical Christianity, they should eventually move to a doctrinal topic.^[35] However, if the group cannot make a doctrine practical they do not understand that doctrine. It is difficult to separate a true understanding of doctrine from practical Christianity. Furthermore, a so-called doctrinal topic may be very difficult to present in an inductive format. If some of the group members have never studied the mark of the beast, for example, they will not have enough background to participate in a discussion. Such information would be better presented in a didactic format, such as a sermon or seminar.

At the end of the meeting, leaders should encourage the group members to stay for another half an hour.^[36] In this way, the fellowship that the members develop during the meeting is not abruptly broken when the meeting ends. After all, it is easier to form friendships with individual people before or after the meeting than it is during the meeting. It would be nice to serve light refreshments during this time, as long as the refreshments do not become a burden to anyone.^[37]

The Small Group Life-Cycle

Beyond the group meeting, groups should have a vision for growth. After all, any type of ministry, if effective, will attract people. Eventually groups will become too large. They will lose the small group dynamic. A sign of a healthy group is that it spawns new groups (some people call this multiplication). Groups that do not multiply become stagnant or cliquish; without a focus of evangelism, groups are not likely to multiply.^[38]

Comiskey lists four stages in the life-cycle of a group that has a vision for growth. He calls the first stage the "forming stage." During this stage, everyone evaluates the group to find out if it meets their expectations. The leader needs to provide strong leadership during this stage and focus on

icebreakers and social outings. Members should not feel coerced into staying in the group; different groups will meet different needs.[38]

After the forming stage, the group moves into the “storming/norming stage.” This is the stage when group members begin to open up and become their true selves. As a result, conflict sometimes develops during this stage. In the end, though, group members start to take ownership of the group.[40]

The third stage Comiskey calls the “performing stage.” This is the stage in which group members really get to know each other well. If the group is not actively involved in evangelism in this stage, it will become in-grown. Also during this stage, the leader needs to be training new leaders in preparation for stage four.[41]

The final stage in the small group life-cycle is the “reforming stage.” This is the stage in which the groups multiply and the new groups go through the life-cycle again. Comiskey uses the analogy of giving birth to describe this process of beginning new groups.[42]

Conclusion

Leading a small group can be a challenge, but it is by no means insurmountable. Leaders must not forget the spiritual prerequisite. If they fulfill it, they have already won half the battle. Comiskey observes that small group leaders never stop learning. The more they lead the more they grow.[43]

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* The first two dimensions are difficult to achieve by any method other than small groups.