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Practical Ministry Skills:

The First Meeting

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

Leading a small group sounded like an amazing, exciting new adventure. You had visions of deep spiritual growth, authentic relationships, and late evenings of laughter. You marveled over the stories of life-change occurring in small groups, and you wanted to be part of it all.

But now it's a few hours before your first meeting, and you're wondering what you've signed up for. No need to be alarmed. You really are qualified and ready to lead. And while the first meeting may not look exactly like the deeply spiritual small group of your dreams, it could look like that over time. For now, just focus on the first meeting and getting off to a great start. We've got the tools to help you start strong.

You Can Do It!

Right about now you need some encouragement. Brett Eastman assures you that you have what it takes to lead, and he gives you the ABCs for success. Then John Ortberg lets you know that you're not crazy for wanting to lead a small group—in fact, he says it's worth the effort.

Start Well

These articles will give you the survival skills for the first night—not just so you can survive, but so you can thrive. Find lots of tips for preparing for the meeting, leading the first meeting, and following up with group members afterward. Plus, Reid Smith gives you options for childcare.

—AMY JACKSON is Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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What Did I Get Myself Into?

Even if you're doubting your decision, you've got what it takes.

By Brett Eastman

Chances are, you're not 100 percent confident about leading your group. You may have had training, helped with another group, or been apprenticed, but you're still not sure you're cut out for this. After all, doesn't it require something . . . more?

I can still remember the day John, the leader of my college group, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Brett, I think you're ready to facilitate a group with a few other guys." I felt unqualified. I didn't know where my Bible was, let alone how to lead a study through it. Despite my insecurities, he persuaded me to lead.

What Does It Take?

When called to lead, the response often is, "I don't have what it takes." But here are five simple principles to enable you to cultivate a healthy group that produces healthy lives over time.

1. **Connect your group with one another.** It's your job to create a circle of friends, so ask the Lord who he wants you to bring together.
2. **Cultivate your spiritual journey.** The dream is that you spur your group on toward love and good deeds. But this only happens by hearing the Word of God. Get into God's Word like you've never done before, because this is how you'll grow and be able to encourage others on the journey.
3. **Champion your gifts together.** Bring them in, build them up, and train them for ministry. Help people discover their unique God-given gifts. Celebrate and cheer on each other.
4. **Coach your group to shepherd one another.** Not all of us are called to be leaders and teachers. But all of us are called to disciple—or shepherd—one another. Our job is to send them out, not just bring them in and build them up.
5. **Celebrate your lives together.** The big idea here is to gather people, even when they go out and start a new group, and celebrate life together. Don't miss birthdays, anniversaries, or life-changing events.

Where Do You Begin?

Now you know you have what it takes, but you may be wondering where to begin. It's as simple as ABC:

First **ask God** who to invite. That's what Jesus did when he sought his disciples. Go through your e-mail and phone lists, and ask God to reveal who to invite, and be open to the unexpected person he might reveal.

Once God reveals those names, **begin inviting** them right away. Don't hesitate, but pick up the phone and call them.

Then take the time to **check out material** to use for your study. There are lots of studies available through SmallGroups.com, or your church may have a collection of studies. Otherwise, think about a book of the Bible that interests you or a book or topic that's caught your eye. The key is to check out the material and begin prepping right away.

In 1Peter 5:2 believers are urged to "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be." Some of you are saying, "I'm not entrusted with a flock, am I?" You're given a circle of friends—this is your flock that God entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not begrudgingly, because there's no one else to do it. And remember, your reward will be an unfading crown of glory in honor and praise of God himself.

—BRETT EASTMAN served as the Small Group Champion at Saddleback Church and Willow Creek Community Church; copyright 2004 by Christianity Today.

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Discuss

1. As you head into your first meeting, what are your feelings?
2. Which of the five Cs are you confident about? Which ones are you nervous about? What steps can you take to ease your anxiety?
3. Where are you at in the ABCs? What will it take for you to complete the next step?

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No, You're Not Crazy!

Why leading a small group is more than worth the trouble

Interview with John Ortberg

SmallGroups.com: You've been an advocate for discipleship and Christian community for a while now. In your experience, is it an easy task or a difficult task to lead others through an experience like a small group?

No, it's not easy. It's never easy.

Any idea why that is?

Well, for one thing I think all of us feel this tremendous sense of inadequacy when it comes to helping other people grow spiritually. I'm more aware of my flaws than anybody else is, and that creates an inhibitor.

I also think that when you ask leaders what the number one challenge is to leading a small group, and keeping that group healthy, pretty consistently it will be "extra grace required" people. Rick Warren has an old saying that if you look around the group and you can't find the "extra grace required" person—you're it.

Ultimately, theologically, we're all "extra grace required" people. But the way group dynamics work and given the chemistry of a group, there may be one person who is in a particularly needy season of life or has a lack of self-awareness. And that creates a dynamic that becomes difficult for the whole group. Trying to figure out how to manage that, how to walk through those dynamics—that's a huge challenge for any group leader.

Is it worth it, then, for people to take the plunge and lead a group?

Oh, man. There's an old saying from Harry Stack Sullivan, who was a leader in the school of interpersonal psychology. He used to say: "It takes people to make people sick, and it takes people to make people well." Now, given the reality of sin, we can probably get sick on our own. But for sure it takes people to make people well.

So, does a small group speed up that process by helping people experience authentic community?

I actually think that one of the dangers of small groups—especially for those of us who do a lot of teaching—is that we can romanticize small groups so that people's expectations get built up way too high. And then the reality can be disappointing.

I think what small groups can do is create the context in which authentic community can be experienced. But that requires getting to know people. That requires us to trust other people and have joy with people and be vulnerable with people. That requires appropriate levels of confrontation and grace. All of those can happen when people get into a small group, but they don't necessarily happen when people get into a small group. We need to be realistic about that.

Still, for most churches, I think small groups remain the best single vehicle that gives people the best shot at entering into authentic community.

What would you tell a group leader who is just getting started and there aren't any tongues of fire on their members' heads? Are they still okay?

Yes, and welcome to the human race.

Bonhoeffer actually has a great section in *Life Together* where he's talking about Christian community, and he says that we all tend to enter into community with this idealized dream of what we think a perfect community is supposed to be like. And he says it's actually a very important thing that we get disillusioned—that we get over our idealized dream. Because only then can we enter into the reality of actual people. And what we're called to love are real people. And of course Jesus had quite a lot to say about the importance of loving beyond just people who it's easy for you to love.

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Was your first small-group experience a positive or a negative one?

Actually, the first church small-group experience I was in was with my wife, and we had very small children. That was the only time we had during the week to have adult conversation, where there were no little kids around. My wife and I would always go to Carl's Jr. and have a glass of iced tea together before heading over to our small group, which was a bunch of other couples at our age and stage. So, it was wonderful.

How do you feel that small groups as a whole have impacted the kingdom of God? What have they brought to churches, and to the Church?

I think it was Robert Wuthnow who said that the small-group movement is the biggest social revolution in America. In an era where people have become increasingly mobile, uprooted, and disconnected from family structures and social structures, I think small groups have become a huge vehicle for people to experience relationship, intimacy, and community. And in a lot of cases that comes to people who might not have it otherwise.

If you had a chance to encourage new small-group leaders, what would you say?

I would say: "It's worth it." When I was at Willow Creek Community Church back in Chicago, a common message we delivered to people in ministry was, "You're not crazy." In those times when you think: *Man, this is really hard. Nobody was talking tonight, or I've got a really difficult person in this group, or I'm feeling like I don't know how to lead a discussion*—you never know when God is going to use a moment, a session, or a connection with somebody else. You never know when a person is going to show up with a broken heart, and God's going to choose you and your group to be a vessel of grace.

You don't carry the outcome on your shoulders. But when you show up and offer a devoted spirit—it's worth it.

—JOHN ORTBERG is pastor of Menlo Park (California) Presbyterian Church and the author of numerous books, including [The Me I Want to Be](#); copyright 2010 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you felt the inadequacy that Ortberg talks about? How have you dealt with it?
2. When have you experienced authentic community in a small group? What was it like? How did you get to that point?
3. How are you encouraged by this article?

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Make the Most of Your First Meeting

From before they arrive to after they're gone

By Mark Ingmire

It's been said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and that's true with small groups. We can't underestimate the importance of the first meeting for setting the group on track. Here are a few tips that have served me well when I've launched new small groups.

Before Anyone Steps Inside

It's easy to focus on what to do once everyone arrives, but there are plenty of necessary tasks to accomplish beforehand. These tasks will help people feel welcome.

Reduce Fears

Group members bring many fears with them to small group—whether or not they've been in a small group before. The more you can alleviate these fears, the better. They may be asking:

- Where is the house?
- Do I ring the doorbell or just walk in?
- Will I be liked? Will I be underdressed?
- Will I have to pray out loud?
- Will there be weird people in the group?
- Will I be the weird one?

To alleviate these initial fears, I generally send an e-mail to all group members several days before the meeting. I include the full address of the home, basic directions to get there, instructions on parking, information on the dress code, what to bring, and a simplified version of our schedule for the evening. Additionally, I tell them to look for a sign at the home. The night of the meeting, I create a sign that says "Small Group," placing it near the driveway or entrance. I also like to attach balloons to it for added visibility.

Prepare the Agenda

A great first meeting probably won't happen if you decide just to "wing it." Instead, spend time planning what you'll do. Most group meetings can be divided into three parts: study, prayer, and sharing. For your first meeting you may not plan any time for study. If you do, it may only take up a small portion of the meeting. The majority of your time should be spent on fellowship—giving group members time to get to know one another. Doing this builds trust that will inspire group members to share more openly with one another as your group progresses. Whatever you do that first night, remember to keep it simple. Don't try to pack it with more than you have time for.

Pay Attention to Logistics

Make sure that you give as much attention to the meeting environment as you have to the agenda. Be sure any part of the home being used is clean. Don't overlook the guest bathroom. Turn on plenty of lights—especially in the meeting room. It's also wise to turn on the bathroom light so group members know where it's located. Prepare the room you'll be meeting in by placing chairs in a circle. If you'll be using supplies for an activity, make sure there are enough for everyone. Minimize distractions by putting away pets and turning down phone ringers.

When Group Members Arrive

These tips are helpful as people arrive, putting them at ease and setting the tone.

Recruit Greeters

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Whether it's you, the host, or a particularly warm group member, choose someone who will focus on greeting others at the door. This will communicate to group members that they were expected and welcome. It will also allow others to chat together without constantly having to run to the front door.

Focus on Others

When you greet others, you either say "Here I am!" or "There you are!" Choose to recognize the other person. Let me explain. When you greet someone in a light-hearted, funny way—like saying "Howdy, stranger!" or "Have we met?"—you keep the focus on yourself. *You're* trying to be funny. *You're* the witty person trying to lighten the mood.

To many people, though, this will come across as self-centered, fake, or at least misplaced. Think about it: your group members are starting on a serious (yet fun!) journey together. If someone has had a difficult week and wants to share later in the meeting, your silly greeting may set the wrong tone, making them reconsider.

Instead of focusing on you, commit to focusing on others. Tell group members it's good to see them and that you're glad they came. Ask them how they are, and make them feel welcome.

Name Tags

One thing you can do to help people feel at ease is provide name tags. Conversations are more numerous and go much better when you know someone's first name. It's hard to build a relationship with someone when they call you, "Hey, you, there." By wearing name tags, no one will feel awkward when they forget someone's name. Plus, name tags aren't just for the first meeting. Consider using them for every meeting, or every meeting for the first month or two.

During the First Meeting

Once it is time for the first meeting to start, bring out the written agenda and launch into it. As you do, here are a few important reminders.

Start and End on Time

A good group leader always tries to start and end the group meeting on time. This lets group members know that you value their time. They also feel more at ease when they know that they won't be "held hostage" by a meeting that appears to be going on forever.

Have Fun Getting to Know One Another

Icebreakers are the easiest way to have fun and get to know one another. There are plenty of icebreakers you can do with your small group. Just make sure that everyone can participate. Don't underestimate the importance of spending time having fun and getting to know one another. As I mentioned earlier, group members bring their fears and past experiences with them. By starting out with a fun activity, you'll set a great tone for the rest of your meetings.

I believe icebreakers are great at all meetings, but you'll want to spend a larger chunk of time on them at this first meeting. As you get to know one another, you'll build trust and relationships.

Here are two icebreaker activities that don't take any preparation:

Whatcha Got? Group members find three things in their billfold or purse which tell a little bit about themselves. Take turns allowing group members to share their items and how the items describe them. You can increase or decrease the number of items depending on the number of people present.

Two Truths and a Lie. Group members must create three statements about themselves to share with the group, making two true and one a lie. As group members share their three statements, the rest of the group members should guess which statement is a lie.

See SmallGroups.com for more [icebreakers](#).

Introduce Your Covenant

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Every small group in my ministry is required to have a covenant. We give every group leader a sample covenant, and they tailor it to their group (for sample covenants, see [Best Church Practices: Small-Group Covenants](#)). You and your group can use an existing covenant or build a covenant from scratch. Either way, it's a good idea to introduce your covenant in the first meeting. Covenants make expectations clear instead of depending on assumed expectations. This sets up your small group for health and success.

A great way to introduce a covenant or to help build a covenant is simply to ask your group two questions:

- What is one thing you hope to gain by being part of this small group?
- What is one fear you have about being a part of this small group?

What they share will help answer important parts of the covenant such as how they will interact and treat one another. Their answers will also give you an indication of what they will value more in your group such as study, fellowship, or serving.

Keep the Meeting on Track

This is important for all meetings: Keep the agenda on track. Don't let anyone hijack the meeting unless you feel it's necessary. There is nothing more draining than someone who has taken the group hostage with a pet project or a pet peeve. When you keep the meeting on track, you'll find that you are able to accomplish everything on your agenda and keep your group members happy.

After the Meeting

After the meeting is over, a good group leader will try to sustain the growth and intimacy built between group members during the first meeting. You can do this by staying in touch with your group members during the week. It could be a phone call, an e-mail, or a Facebook message. This small touch communicates to group members that they are important. When they feel valued, their trust in you and the group will grow rather than diminish between meetings.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What fears might group members bring with them? What will you do to reduce these fears?
2. How can you greet people in a way that focuses on them? What might you say or do?
3. What can you do to ensure the meeting stays on track? How can you verbalize this desire to your group?

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First Night Survival Guide

Preparing for and leading your first meeting

By Will Johnston

Someone asked you to lead a small group. And right now, you're really questioning why you said yes. You've had some training, found a study, talked with your pastor or director, and even had a few people say they're coming. But now it's just two days before your first meeting, and you're not feeling very prepared. You find yourself panicking, wondering what you'll do if no one talks, or if your entire group is made up of weird people.

Leading a small group isn't rocket science, but it can be a bit intimidating, especially the first time around. Here are a few tips to make your first group meeting go smoothly—a survival guide, if you will.

Preparation

It's true: Failing to plan is planning to fail. So consider these four things while preparing for your first meeting.

Communication

A day or two before the group meeting, get in touch with the folks who have expressed interest in your group. You can use the phone, a text, social media, e-mail, or whatever works best for your context and demographic.

Be sure to remind everyone when and where the group is meeting and give them your phone number in case someone gets lost. On that note, be sure your phone is turned on and the ringer is turned up before the group starts. You don't want anyone to miss the meeting because they couldn't get in touch with you at the last minute.

You may also want to ask people to confirm whether or not they're coming so that you can be prepared. It can be tough both mentally and logistically if you expect 15 and get 5 (or vice versa).

Food

Nothing creates conversation like cuisine. I don't know if you've ever noticed, but strangers sitting around a table full of food are much more relaxed and talkative. Food breaks the ice and opens people up. My agenda for the first group meeting is often just dinner and conversation. I want people to start getting to know one another before we dive into a study.

If you don't think you're up for tackling dinner (and I'll be honest, cooking a whole meal for a group of people can add stress to the evening) be sure to have snacks. I recommend the three Cs: chips, cookies, and caffeine. In other words: something salty, something sweet, and something good to drink.

Environment

Create a welcoming environment. People are less likely to stick around if they're uncomfortable. Make sure you have enough chairs. Turn on the lights. Burn a candle to get rid of that funky odor. Put a fresh hand towel in the bathroom.

As a side note: There are some folks with the gift of hospitality reading this who have no idea why this section's here. For those of us without the gift of hospitality, or for those who are perhaps new to having a place to host (ahem, 23-year-old guys just out of college), these tips aren't always second-nature.

Prayer

Prayer is the easiest thing to overlook during the frantic preparation process, but it's also one of the most vital. This isn't just a social gathering or a team meeting. Your goal as a small-group leader is not only to create community but also to make disciples, to help people become more like Jesus. And if you're going to do that well, you'll need his help to do it.

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In the days leading up to the first meeting, pray for your group. Pray that God would send the right people and that those who come would connect well and find community. Pray for wisdom and discernment for yourself as the group leader. Above all, pray that God would be glorified through your group.

Go Time

Once you've prepped as much as possible, you'll actually need to lead the meeting. Whatever you do, be sure to focus on community and vision.

Community

I'd argue that discipleship should be the top priority for your small group. However, it's not your top priority for the first meeting. Instead, your main goal is for people to get to know each other. You don't need to cover material or help people grow spiritually or any of that. Just make sure people actually connect with one another. That's what will bring them back and open the door for discipleship. Here are a few tips to help make that happen:

- Set aside time for conversation. Consider not having any other agenda for the first meeting. Again, having conversation over dinner is a great option.
- Greet everyone personally. As the small-group leader, do your best to meet everyone at the door when they first come in, especially if they don't know others in the group.
- If you notice people standing alone, talk with them and introduce them to other folks. Help group members connect with each other.
- Use an icebreaker question like "Tell us a story about your best friend from childhood." It may seem silly, but it helps spark conversation, and the right questions can really help a group get to know one another. (Check out other [icebreakers](#) on [SmallGroups.com](#).)
- Help people learn each others' names. If it's a big group you may want to bring name tags. You could also play a game to help remember names. For instance, ask people to say their name and an adjective that describes them and begins with the same first letter (e.g., Serene Sarah, Theology Tony, Caring Cathy). Six years later, I still remember my friend Adam as "Average Adam" because he introduced himself that way.

Vision

While your first priority is building community, you have a very important second priority for the night: casting vision for the group. The people who are part of your group want to know what you'll be doing together.

Answer their questions by considering:

- Why are we meeting?
- What do we hope to accomplish?
- Are we a group that requires consistent attendance or is it okay if people pop in and out?
- Do we have a group covenant?
- Will we have weekly homework?
- Are members expected to attend service projects?
- How long will the group last?

If your church has a set idea of what your group will be about, you'll simply communicate these expectations. If you have flexibility over what you'll be doing, studying, and accomplishing, you may want to involve everyone in answering these questions.

Remember that it's much easier to set these expectations at the beginning than it is to change the culture of the group later on. And if a problem does need to be addressed in the future, it's helpful if the expectations were communicated up front.

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Next Steps

Whew! You made it through your first meeting. Even if you're exhausted and just want to watch some TV or go to bed, there are a couple of things you need to do that will help you a lot in the future. Then there are a few things you can do later to follow up.

Right Away

First of all, it's a good idea to do something to help you remember people's names. It's easy to forget them by week two. One helpful idea is to picture each person in your head and repeat his or her name (and adjective) a few times. Another idea that has helped me is to sit where you sat during the meeting and write down each person in the group by where they sat. Start with the person to your right and continue until you've made it all the way around the circle. Lastly, you may want to find your new group members on Facebook and send friend requests. All of these tips will help you remember your new group members' names.

Secondly, make a note to follow through on any requests. I've found that during the meeting I might tell one person I'd e-mail him and another person that I'd look up more information on the passage. Don't forget about these requests. Try to do them right away. If that's not possible, write yourself a reminder.

Later On

At some point in the next day or so, you should follow up with your new group members. You can use whatever communication medium is appropriate for your context. I personally find e-mail to be a great tool for the post-meeting follow up. Remind group members of any relevant details, especially the time of the next group meeting and any homework that needs to be done before then. You can also include a link to resources (books, studies, curriculum, etc.) that they need to order for the next meeting.

Lastly, continue to pray for your group. As you get to know them better and better, you'll know how to pray specifically for each member. Most important, ask Jesus to help you all follow him more closely.

Don't Stress Out

I would guess that you've been overwhelmed with information about leading a group, and you probably have no idea how to keep it all straight. Even this "survival guide" may seem overwhelming. You may be going overboard trying to get everything perfect before your first night. If that's you, I have some words of wisdom.

The first night of my small group was just last week. We aren't a new group, but it was our first meeting in a long time and we intentionally welcomed new people to our meeting. Unfortunately, the day of the meeting I didn't have time to prepare. Instead, I ended up dealing with a broken down car, figuring out how to carry a carful of stuff home on the subway. Once home I had to try to fix my cell phone charger, so that my phone would be charged before group. Plus, my wife and I had a fight—just to top off a great day.

Needless to say, very few of the things I normally do to prepare didn't happen. I even missed an e-mail from a prospective group member who wanted to come to my group. According to my suggestions for a successful first meeting, I failed.

But everything turned out fine. The group still met, and we still had a good time getting to know one another. And I don't think anyone hates me. Ultimately, we need to remember that God is responsible for his church, and that includes each of our small groups. God uses our preparations, but God will work it all out, even if you forget the cookies.

—WILL JOHNSTON is the Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What will need to be done to prepare your meeting place? Will you do this or will someone else?
2. What vision will you give your small-group members? What questions do you need to answer in order to formulate your vision?
3. How stressed are you about getting everything exactly right at the first meeting? Take time to offer these worries to God.

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Lead a Strong First Meeting

Tips on making the most of your first night

By Pat J. Sikora

Whether you are a new or experienced leader, starting a new small group can be intimidating, especially if you don't know the members well. You may be concerned about how to make people feel welcome, how to break the ice, and how to create a first meeting environment that will lead to a successful group. You've heard it before, but it's true: You only have one chance to make a good first impression. So if you're about to launch a new group, here are some things you will want to do.

Set Some Goals

There's a saying I always remember when starting a group: If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. If you want a successful group, you need to know where you're going. There are many types of small groups. What type will yours be? What will be your group's purpose? Will it be open or closed? Who should be in your group? Will it be a Bible study, a sermon-based group, or a book study? Are there goals that have been established by your church? How much flexibility do you have? Answer these questions and set your goals before you do anything else. And be sure to include the Lord in your plans.

Decide How You'll Gain Members

Sometimes you will invite members; other times they will be assigned to you. Find out how you'll fill your group and make a plan. If you have the freedom, consider inviting people from outside of your immediate group of friends. You might also invite newcomers to your church or challenging people who would benefit from being included.

Make Your Invitation Clear

When you're ready to invite potential members, make sure that you communicate everything they'll need to know to make a wise decision about their participation. This includes:

- The purpose of the group
- The name of the study, book, or topic
- Day and time of the meeting
- Location of the meetings and the host's name if meeting in a home
- The leader's name and contact information
- Whether the group is open or closed
- How long the group will meet, or if it is open-ended

Find a Co-leader or Apprentice

Don't lead alone. A co-leader is someone who is qualified and ready for leadership. He or she can make your life much easier by sharing responsibility for the group, including leading when you're absent or taking responsibility for areas that fall in your weaknesses. An apprentice, on the other hand, is someone who is equally qualified for leadership but still needs some experience and training. You'll be able to invest in your apprentice through on-the-job training, preparing him or her to lead one day.

Decide on a Meeting Place

Although it seems simple, this will be one of the most important decisions you will make. A meeting space needs to fit the demands of your particular group. Older people will need a different type of space than students, for example. If you're meeting at the church, you may have less control over the space. But in general, be sure you consider such noise, parking, transportation, safety, lighting, seating arrangements, ventilation, and distractions (including children and pets).

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Practice Hospitality

Once you've decided on a meeting space, be sure to have it set up in advance. Have the space ready to welcome your guests at least 20 minutes before the meeting is scheduled to begin. This means making sure you have enough seating for everyone, having refreshments ready, and having all study and worship materials set out. Whether or not you plan on having refreshments at all meetings, be sure to have them at your first meeting. It will provide a natural time of mingling and getting acquainted.

Lead Your First Meeting

In an attempt to be egalitarian and open, some leaders drop the ball here. They don't take the lead, and the meeting falls flat. It's essential that at your first meeting, you make it clear that you know what you're doing (even if you feel you don't) and have thought through the order of the meeting. You've been trained for just this moment, so don't sit back and act like "just another group member."

You'll talk more than usual at the first meeting as you establish the purpose and schedule of the group meetings. Here is one way to spend your time that first night:

20 minutes: Get acquainted and enjoy refreshments. Allow a laid-back time of mingling.

10 minutes: Officially begin the meeting by calling everyone together and opening in prayer. Introduce yourself and your co-leader or apprentice, giving a very brief introduction of who you are and why you're leading this group.

10 minutes: Briefly discuss your goals for the group. Are you here primarily to study God's Word, make friends, heal, recover, serve, or learn a skill? Clarify your expectations so there are no surprises. This might include commitments to attendance, homework, honest disclosure, accountability, confidentiality, and commitment to growth or maturity. It might also include special rules on space, finances, childcare, or time commitments. You may want to discuss which of these are open to discussion by the group and which have already been decided by you or others. End this time by signing your group covenant.

30 minutes: By now, you've talked enough. Ask people to introduce themselves by giving one or two pertinent bits of information about themselves. Don't go too deep at this point. Keep it light and limited to public information, like how long they've been at the church, their occupation, or how many children they have. You can also do an icebreaker to delve a little deeper. Keep this light and perhaps funny. For a first meeting, I like "What one item in your purse or pocket best defines you and why?" A question like this gives room for people to be as deep or superficial as they are comfortable with. The goal is to let people catch a glimpse of who their fellow group members are. Try to keep this to a few minutes per person. Realize that five minutes per person in a group of 10 is almost an hour. Be clear what information you want and about how long you want each person to talk.

10 minutes: Take time for worship. Sing a few songs, read a Psalm aloud, or lift prayers of thanksgiving. While you may want to do this first, I recommend saving it until the end of your first meeting so people can grow comfortable with one another.

5 minutes: Introduce the study, including the books or study guides you'll be using. Ideally you will already have purchased these and can distribute them. Briefly tell members why you chose this study, what you hope to accomplish, and what to have completed for next week.

5-10 minutes: If you have time, ask for prayer requests and pray for one another. If you don't have time at this meeting, make time at future meetings. Prayer is one of most important thing you will do as a group.

Whatever you do at your first meeting, honor the start and stop times. This will set a precedent for future meetings and let group members know that you value their time. After you've officially ended the meeting, some group members may linger if they don't have to rush home. Take advantage of this great time to build relationships. However, you still need to end the official meeting on time.

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Evaluate the Meeting

If possible, evaluate the meeting with someone else: your co-leader, apprentice, spouse, or a friend. What worked? What didn't? How do you want to change things next time? Is there anyone who seems like a challenging person? How do you need to prepare for dealing with him or her? Don't be too hard on yourself. There will always be areas you want to improve, but I'm betting you did better than you think. Find several positives that you can thank God for.

Congratulations! You're a leader, and your first meeting was a success!

—PAT J. SIKORA is founder of [Mighty Oak Ministries](#) and author of [Why Didn't You Warn Me?](#); copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How will you invite people to your group? What information should you have available to them when you invite them?
2. What will you do your first night? Will you follow the schedule in this article or do something different?
3. Who can you evaluate your meeting with? Is there another leader, a coach, or a trusted friend you can talk to?

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Small-Group Ground Rules

Six things to discuss as a group so you're all on the same page

By Jay Firebaugh

I've never been a big fan of formalized small-group covenants. But I do think there's value in establishing ground rules at the first meeting, and then designating a small-group meeting once a year to go over the ground rules and purposes of your group. If you or your church feels better stating these more formally as a covenant, that's fine. Either way, it is important that you talk about these things and be sure that you all agree.

Here are the things you need to discuss and agree on:

Purpose

What are we going to be about as a group? What is the reason we get together every week? I think there's value in talking about commitments like weekly attendance and involvement in other group members' lives. Being a gospel-community means being genuine friends and allies—and that level of relationship requires a commitment to the meetings and each other.

Location

Where are we going to meet? I'm a big fan of meeting in homes and rotating among homes. You could meet in a different home each month, rotate each meeting, or have group members volunteer at each meeting for the following week. Meeting in someone's home can allow you to get to know the person in a unique, intimate way. Agree on basic rules that will apply to all homes. In our case, we have the host home provide beverages, plates, and utensils. Someone else in the group is responsible for bringing the snack. You will also need to respect the rules at different homes, especially if there are kids. Be sure to review the house rules at the start of each meeting, or when you rotate to a new home. Different people care about different things, and that's perfectly fine.

Expectations

What should you do if you are not able to make it to the meeting? Who will lead the discussion? By laying out these expectations, you can avoid a lot of hurt feelings and confusion. You can also cover expectations that make the group meetings more meaningful, such as being on time, turning off cell phones, or participating in meetings. Equal participation is especially important so that group members know they're invited and expected to share at the meetings, use their spiritual gifts, host, and bring snacks.

Confidentiality

What's said in the group should stay in the group unless permission is given to share it elsewhere. This is not to create a dysfunctional group that keeps unhealthy secrets. Instead, it is to create a culture of safety where everyone feels safe to share thoughts and feelings and knows that others will not find out.

Children and Childcare

If you have children at your group, what's the plan? What is each person's part in making that plan work? There are many ways to handle children, and you will need to decide what will work best for your group.

Growth, Outreach, and Multiplication

It's important, at least once a year, to discuss the fact that your group isn't going to be an end in itself. You should make clear that your group will seek to have the heart of Jesus and reach out to others, always making room for new members. That means new people are always welcome and everyone must do their best to be welcoming. It also means the group will likely reach a size someday that calls for multiplication, and you need to be planning and preparing for when that day comes.

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Depending on your church or type of group, you may find there are other things you need to discuss as well. It's a good idea to spend time praying together for God to work in and through your group this year. Spend time laying out the plan and purpose of your group, making clear all expectations. When you do this, your group will not only be a safe place, but will also be unified around the purpose. You are likely to have less conflict and less confusion, and you'll be able to point back to this conversation if things do get off track.

—JAY FIREBAUGH is the Director of Small Groups at New Life Church in Gahanna, Ohio. You can check out practical tools for pastors and small-group leaders on his [All About Small Groups](#) Facebook page; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Have you used a covenant in the past? How do you feel about covenants? How does your church feel about them?
2. How do you feel about covenanting about growth and multiplication? How do you think your group will respond?
3. What other topics should you cover in your covenant?

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The Childcare Conundrum

An overview of childcare options

By Reid Smith

For churches wanting to include younger families in small groups, childcare will always be one of the larger obstacles. But there is hope. Several options exist for successfully accommodating children within a small-group setting.

Children or No Children?

Here are some common options when children participate with adults in the group:

1. Children remain present with adults for the entire meeting.
2. Children remain present with adults for part of the meeting, and then break into a separate group in a separate room. Children can develop their own small group, participate in an activity (such as a Veggie Tales video), or enjoy a supervised time of free play.
3. Children join the adults every other meeting, or once a month. Children and adults meet separately during the other weeks.
4. Children and adults meet separately for the entire meeting.

Finding a Babysitter

If you decide to have the children separated from the adults, it's good to have a babysitter. Here are some ideas for finding and paying a babysitter:

1. Adults work together to arrange a babysitter for all of the children in the group. Payment is split among all group members, or among only those bringing children.
2. A babysitter cares for most of the children during the group meeting, but nursing infants are allowed to remain with adults.
3. Outside of the small group, each parent arranges for the care of their own children through a relative or sitter.
4. Older, responsible children of group members serve as the babysitters for the rest of the children of your small group.
5. Young adults or teenagers from the church's youth ministry volunteer to care for the children of your small group as an act of service.
6. Young adults or teenagers from the church's youth ministry care for the children of your small group and are paid for their work.
7. Participants of other small groups at your church (ones that meet during a different time of the week) rotate to provide childcare for your small group, which returns the service.

In all of these cases, it's also wise to check with your church leaders about their child protection policies. They may have suggestions on how to safely care for the children in your group.

Thinking through childcare options from the start of a small group is essential. You'll minister to young families by making them feel cared for and appreciated.

—REID SMITH is the Community Life Pastor of Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, and the founder of the [2orMore](#); copyright 2007 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What are the demographics of your group: young families? Single parents? Empty Nesters? Singles? How might they feel about providing childcare?
2. Are there other people you could invite if you provided childcare? Who?
3. Which of these options would work best for your small group? Are there any other options you can think of?

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Small Group Blessings

What I've learned through my small group

By Brett Eastman

When I met with my new small group for the first time, I was so reluctant. I didn't know if I could ever find the sense of belonging and spiritual family I had enjoyed with my previous groups. But they welcomed my wife and me into their lives with arms wide open, and we soon became family. It has become a circle of life, love, and learning. Here are a few things I've learned over the last few years with them:

Laughter is the fuel of life. I can't tell you how many times I was going through a hard time with my wife, my kids, or work, and I came to my small group with tanks empty. There were times when I was tired, sad, or pressured at work, and they just made me laugh—knee slapping, tear-producing laughter. From practical jokes to the ironies of life, I just love how we can take what we do seriously, but not take ourselves so seriously. There were so many times I drove home saying "I needed that!"

I long to belong. I love being "in." I love being "a part." I love being "included." My group has consistently reminded me that this isn't only the needy, group-happy Brett, but a God-given desire, a divine calling, a pathway to a healthy, balanced life.

Pain is universal. It's just not always visible. When I've seen my group share their pain (as in hurts, struggles, temptations, etc.), it makes me want to share on a whole other level. We have had cancer, parent health problems, marital issues, teenager chaos, emotional brokenness, job transitions, children leaving home, surgeries, heart scares, financial fears, and more. And when we go below the water level of our hearts, there has been gold there for me. Why? Because it makes me feel I'm not alone.

I am a beginner when it comes to listening. I am realizing anew how much I talk—many times out of insecurity—wanting to fill the space with words. My group has helped me see this and is showing me how I can learn and grow as I simply listen more. The best part about this reminder is that I can hear more of what God is saying through them.

Sometimes the best curriculum is the curriculum of life. I used to feel guilty about not doing a big, long Bible study each week, especially with all the teachers and Bible scholars in the group. But I have discovered again that as the Word became flesh in Christ, so it does in them—through their hands, feet, hearts, and hope poured out for Christ to me.

Confession is the primary pathway to community. As John Powell once said in his classic book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, "If I tell you who I am and you don't like me, I will be alone!" But my group has not done this to either my wife or me. When we told them we were struggling with going to church this past year, they accepted us. When we said we didn't want to come to group one evening because we were having marriage problems, they embraced us, making it safer to show up more and more. What a gift! The Bible verse, "Confess your sins to one another and you will be healed," became real to us.

Everyone has something to teach me. The childhood loss of one serves as comfort for me and others today. Cancer in one serves to support cancer in another. Intimacy of one grew intimacy in another. Additionally, those who have "triggered" me have become my greatest teachers. Sometimes one person in the group has made me mad, another sad, and both have grown to be gifts to me.

Bad days are sometimes the best days. This truth has taken me from days of not wanting to go to small group to anticipating what I will learn when I do. I am most proud of my own wife, who takes more risks than I ever do. I just watch the group love on her and breathe life in her like few things I have ever seen. I've come to realize that it's not a question of whether they care but if I'll let them care. I've learned that if I am

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going to try and live my life alone I can, but I don't have to. And if I do, it's my fault. I make myself alone by not making myself known.

It feels cruel for God to allow pain in my life for someone else's comfort until I am comforted by someone else's pain. Honestly, I'm tired of the pain that results from sin and circumstances I cannot control. However, the profound lesson in all of this is when I said to my group, "This feels crazy and nothing short of insane," they didn't try to fix me. They didn't say I know your pain (because no one fully can). But several of them had a look of understanding. They didn't and needn't say more. But oh how big, how deep that was to me.

Yes I am crazy. Yes I am overly passionate. But there is something sacred in the circle, and it's my place, my path and my purpose in life! They have helped authenticate my calling in life. You know how sometimes you wonder? Well, I don't wonder anymore. In fact, I dream more and more. I am honored and privileged by what God has given through my group and what I sense he will give in the future. I look forward to what's in store in the next year.

—BRETT EASTMAN served as the Small Group Champion at Saddleback Church and Willow Creek Community Church; copyright 2004 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Part of sharing your vision with your small group is explaining why small groups are important. What are some of your favorite reasons/lessons from Brett? Why are they your favorites?
2. What are your own reasons for loving small groups? How have small groups ministered to you?
3. How can you share with your group members why small groups are important? How can you communicate your excitement about the journey you're beginning together?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you start your small group well

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Foundations of a Small-Group Leader](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [How to Prepare for a Bible Study](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Making Small Groups Fun!](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Ministering to Difficult Group Members](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide](#) (Orientation Guide)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[Kyria.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders within the church.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[Field Guide for Small Group Leaders](#) by Sam O'Neal. Great, practical advice for leading small-group meetings (IVP Connect, 2012; ISBN 978-0830810918).

[Leading Life-Changing Small Groups](#) by Bill Donahue. A comprehensive go-to resource for small-group leaders (Zondervan, 2012; ISBN 978-0310331254).

[Making Small Groups Work](#) by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. This is a one-stop small-group leader's guide for gatherings of all sorts (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

[Why Didn't You Warn Me?](#) by Pat J. Sikora. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).