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What Do We Want to Study Next?

Five principles for selecting the right study for your group.

by Michael C. Mack

One question often heard in small groups is, "What are we going to study next?" Rather than sailing toward a destination, many small groups are like a sailboat at sea being "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph. 4:14). As you lead your group, these questions provide you with five principles for selecting the next study for your group:

1. QUESTION: Why does the group exist? PRINCIPLE: The main purpose of every group should flow out of the mission of the church.

The mission of the church where I lead is this: "To team with God in turning unchurched people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." Your church's mission statement is probably similar in that it relates to carrying out the commission Jesus gave His church (Matt. 28:19-20).

Once you have clarified your group's mission, you then need to answer the question, "What can we study next that will help us carry out that mission? What should we study that will help us make disciples or make fully devoted followers of Jesus?"

2. QUESTION: Who is in my group? PRINCIPLE: The small group leader's main function is that of a shepherd who knows his or her sheep.

Here are a few questions a good shepherd will ask:

- Where are people spiritually? As a shepherd, you must know where people are individually and where the group is as a whole. Are participants newborns in the faith, like spiritual teenagers, or are they mature adults? (See passages such as 1 John 1:12-14; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; and Hebrews 5:11-6:1 for discussions on how to shepherd people at different spiritual levels.)
- In what areas do they need to grow? Do they need more knowledge about beliefs and doctrine? Do they need to learn the disciplines or practices of the Christian life? Do they need to understand the virtues of the Christian life or the fruit of the Spirit? There are several effective tools you can use in your group to assess their spiritual maturity in these different core competencies. One is the *Christian Life Profile*, developed by Randy Frazee and others at Pantego Bible Church in Arlington, Texas. (Get more information on the 30 Core Competencies and the Christian Life Profile at their website at www.pantego.org.) You can also find a shorter and free online assessment tool on SmallGroups.com at smallgroups.com/group_leader/leader_tools/growthfinder.html.
- How do they learn best? Do participants in your group tend to learn best through application-oriented discussion, by doing, hearing, reading, or a combination? Would individuals learn better in a group, or would some one-on-one mentoring be helpful?

3. QUESTION: What do you believe? PRINCIPLE: Teach what is in accord with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

As you choose curriculum, be sure it leads you to study God's Word, not just someone's opinions, even opinions that relate to Scripture. Examine a Bible study closely before using it in your group. If you don't feel confident or competent to examine a curriculum piece for doctrinal purity, ask a church leader to do so first.

4. QUESTION: What are your group's capabilities and limitations? PRINCIPLE: A group agreement can help establish some basic ground rules for Bible study selection.

Some considerations:

- **Depth of studies.** Are the studies too deep? Not deep enough? Just right for your group?
- **Homework.** Has your group agreed to do "homework" between studies? Doing some work between studies can be a good approach for deep discipleship, but it also can tend to close a group, since no one wants to come to a group and be the only ones not to have the assignment done. If you do choose to use studies that include some homework, how much is appropriate?
- **Length of study.** How many weeks will the study take? Most groups get antsy with more than a six or seven week study. The old standby of 13 week studies just does not seem to work anymore. Shorter always seems better, but discuss this with your group first.
- **Length of time in each study.** How much time will you spend in Bible study in each session? Are there too many questions for the time allotted by the group?
- **Good questions.** Will the questions in the study lead to discussion and lively interaction, or do the questions sound like a pop quiz, looking for one-sentence answers? A number of books as well as articles on SmallGroups.com have been written about asking good questions. Read them here!
- **Open or closed.** A long study or series may inadvertently close your group. Do sessions build upon each other or are they somewhat independent, so that new people can easily join at anytime?
- **Cost.** Discuss with your group how much members want to shell out for Bible study guides. The price of some curriculum choices may be prohibitive for some participant's budgets. You can often get studies at a fairly significant discount by buying online, though SmallGroups.com's bookstore at smallgroups.com/bookstore/ or at ChristianBibleStudies.com.

5. QUESTION: What are your own capabilities and limitations? PRINCIPLE: Know yourself. Don't get in over your head.

- **Functionality.** How easy is the study to use? Does it include everything you need? Does it have a leader's guide in the back and other leader helps included? Is it organized so that it is easy to follow? Does it include suggested times for sections and activities? Does it provide options so you can make choices based on your leadership style and your

group's personality and interests?

- **Prep time.** How long will it take to prepare for meetings? Do you have to spend an inordinate amount of time finding materials for the study, or is everything self-contained? Will you have to spend a lot of time trimming the study down to fit your group's schedule? Will you have to do a lot of work making the studies fit your group?
- **Cost.** How much is this going to set you back personally? Will you have to purchase a separate, and more expensive, leader's guide?
- **Passion.** Do you like the study? Can you get excited about it each week?

Answer all five of these questions and follow these principles, and you can navigate the sea of curriculum choices successfully. Better yet, you can lead your group to the destination God desires for you.

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