

## **Five Imperatives for Successful Small Groups**

**By Bob Young**

### **1. Know the purpose of the small groups.**

Followers of Jesus get together for all kinds of reasons: fellowship, prayer, accountability, encouragement, and Bible study, to name only a few of the possibilities. When initiating a small group program in a church (or when beginning a new group), understanding the purpose of the groups is essential. Carefully defining the purpose will avoid the common experience of prayer groups that soon find they rarely pray together, or Bible study groups that quickly turn into fellowship groups. In the small group, an effective Bible study leads to worship and prayer, support and accountability, mutual encouragement, sharing God's Word, and opportunities for service. If group members do not commit to becoming a group with these basic dynamics, the group will quickly lose focus and purpose.

Therefore, making the goal clear is essential. By focusing on the goal, the group will stay focused and remember the purpose of gathering together. The group members will expect (and eventually insist on) a spiritual emphasis, shared support and encouragement, opportunity to share the gospel, and shared service.

### **2. Carefully plan the group meetings to fulfill its purpose.**

An essential aspect of small group ministry is how the Bible will be included in the meetings. Many people today find the Bible unapproachable, distant, and beyond understanding. A successful small group will be most satisfying with solid biblical material (written specifically for small groups, honoring group dynamics) to help everyone engage God in his Word. Such material is always text-based and text-focused, accessible, and relevant.

The way the small group functions (including the material the group uses) provides the means by which each participant enters God's Word, interacting with the text of Scripture. Good small group materials take participants back to the text again and again. Good materials use open questions with answers that come directly from the text of the Bible. Do not settle for studies about the Bible; good small group material actually studies the Bible. Good group materials help the group connect the text to their lives. (Remember that a major purpose of small groups is to personalize faith.) Materials must do more than help participants learn about the text; the goal is personal engagement with the God who gave us the text. We study God's word so we can know God—not so we can know about God.

### **3. Carefully select (or screen) the group members.**

Carefully select the core participants for any new small group. People who attend simply for fellowship or to talk will quickly derail the group and thwart its purpose. As the group learns to function and engages God through his Word, the sense of community, relationships, support and encouragement will grow. At times participants will find themselves in crisis and the group will care for one another. Too many small group efforts fail because people join the group only for fellowship, encouragement, or other reasons; these people often hinder the spiritual potential of the group.

In some churches, the hope is that every church member will become active in a small group. How do group leaders go about the process of selecting people as group members? When inviting people to participate in the group, make sure they understand the purpose and the processes. Explain what the group will do and what it will not do. Set expectations. Work hard at the beginning and you will minimize the likelihood of having to wrestle every week to keep the group focused on the purpose.

### **4. For group leaders – study and learn how to lead a group.**

In developing healthy group leadership, perhaps no item deserves more attention than learning how to ask questions. Learn the difference between open and closed questions. Avoid closed questions ("Did you like the material?") and use open questions ("What impressed you this week?"). Open questions draw out what God is doing in the lives of the participants. "What are you learning about God, who he is or what he has done?" "How are you growing in your relationship with God?"

A challenge in managing the group arises from the tendency of many to move away from Scripture to personal opinions. Carefully selected questions will keep the participants in the text. "Where do you see that in the text?" or "How does this passage speak to what you were just saying?"

### **5. Pray.**

Last, but first, pray. Pray for those in the group. Pray for understanding and insight. Pray for courage. Pray about the group—its purpose, the processes, and people. Pray for changed hearts and lives.

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\*Adapted in part from an article by Kristofer D. Holroyd