

LIFE - IMPACT SMALL GROUPS

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MY EXPERIENCE

1 I learned about small groups while attending a church leadership conference in
2 1996. Purchasing a book on starting groups, another church member and I
3 decided to invite some friends to join us in learning about small groups in a small
4 group setting. At the first Friday evening get together we shared a meal, became
5 better acquainted by sharing a little about our personal spiritual journey, listened
6 to a few testimonies about small groups, studied what the Bible had to say on the
7 subject and concluded with prayer. I was wonderfully blessed and remained a
8 part of that group for many months. Spiritual growth took place, relationships
9 between families were greatly ameliorated, and a wonderful bond developed
10 between us. None of us had prior experience, but we were quickly convicted that
11 small groups were the ideal setting where God works. During the course of that
12 experience we were joined by new Christians—new Adventists—and individuals
13 of multiple ages and backgrounds. We knew so little about small groups that we
14 felt like we were stumbling at times, but the fellowship was great, the Bible study
15 was real and the prayers were life changing. Small group became the highlight of
16 the week!

17

18 My role as leader was pretty simple. I thought up some lighter question to
19 introduce the topic and further relationships between us, suggested a chapter of
20 the Bible to read, somewhat facilitated conversation, and signaled the time to start
21 praying. Little time was spent preparing, but the results were life changing and
22 continue to this day. Every member has continued to be involved with groups
23 since then, most have collaborated with others to start groups of their own, and all
24 remain active members of the church.

25

26 Our group continued for three months before being interrupted by an evangelistic
27 series. Afterwards small groups were organized in a more formal and intentional
28 way, and failed for the most part. Failure came as a result of attempting to
29 organize the entire church into groups, more formally selecting materials and the
30 varying concerns about what might happen to group members. Still there was
31 some success, and a couple of groups continued. In spite of the difficulties
32 evolving during this time, the original group remained bonded and working for
33 the good of the church and the new members in spite of being part of many
34 groups. It was as if an organic connection had been made. I have been away

35 from the church for several years, but the friendships with the original group
36 members remains close to this day.

37

38 Life Transformation Group

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40 Later the gender-oriented "Life Transformation" concept was discovered and led
41 to the formation of smaller groups that were even more successful. These mini
42 groups promoted reading the Bible during the week, applying the truths
43 discovered on an ongoing basis, transformation-oriented questions, and
44 conversational prayer.

45

46 Started by two individuals, the group was eventually blessed with additional
47 members. The only preparation was reading a passage of Scripture on a
48 saturation basis during the week before. We would agree to read the same
49 passage of Scriptures a predefined number of times during the week. By the time
50 we arrived at group we had come see and experience things with God that casual
51 reading could have never allowed. Meeting time was a rich sharing time of what
52 God had shown us. We looked for specific things we felt convicted about and
53 wrote them down on cards in our Bibles to remind us. These questions formed
54 the basis of our transformational questions. Leadership was shared by all four
55 members of the group and didn't require any advance preparation time. Members
56 included new Christians and a newly rebaptized member.

57

58 The results were profound. Victories were gained, lifestyles changed, spiritual
59 growth accelerated, and witness fostered, in ways that would have formerly been
60 unimaginable—all because we sought to experience God's presence and power
61 together in the context of a small group.

62

63 The original group eventually birthed other similarly inclined groups.

64

65

66 WHY ARE SMALL GROUPS SO SUCCESSFUL?

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- 68 • Often meet in the home or other informal setting.
- 69 • Provide wonderful community to connect and make friends in.
- 70 • Create environment where students can be real.
- 71 • Allow personal discovery of what the Bible teaches.
- 72 • Create supportive nurturing environment where life change takes place.
- 73 • Easy to organize.
- 74 • Spontaneous
- 75 • Leadership requires little training.
- 76 • Minimal expense.

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WHAT CORE VALUES ARE IMPORTANT?

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82 • Keep it simple:

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84 One of the most important lessons learned is that God can be the most effective in
85 small groups that are configured simply. Complicated lesson outlines, time-
86 consuming preparations, and the need to stick closely to a certain plan invariably
87 worked against success. The same can be said for drawing out simple lessons
88 from the study time. Revelation or Ezekiel are not ideal books for a small group
89 study, unless everyone is into serious Bible study and agrees on that ahead of
90 time. However, it is rare these heavy duty study groups remain meaningful for
91 very long.

92

93 • Stick to the Bible:

94

95 We tried using a small group manual, but found that group members were either
96 bored and worked to make the lesson more interesting, or didn't understand.
97 Providing study books, explaining words and concepts, trying to cover all the
98 materials during the time allocated, detracted from what God wanted to do. Over
99 time we discovered the Bible had a simplicity and power unmatched by any other
100 alternative. Furthermore by sticking to the Bible we could easily invite and
101 assimilate non-church members into our group. Needless to say, some members
102 also had questions about using non-church materials. Everyone had a Bible, the
103 Spirit seemed to specialize in using Scripture and we could easily communicate
104 on any reading assignments.

105

106 • Keep sessions complete:

107

108 There is danger in having "continuing" studies. Newcomers often feel like they
109 cannot fully participate, studies tend to get a little complicated, and absent
110 members miss vital information. Even if a Bible book is being studied
111 (Philippians for example), try to make sure that the study starts and concludes in
112 such a way that everyone can fully participate and can take away something to
113 apply during the week.

114

115 • Rotate leadership:

116

117 Anyone can lead a small group. Not everyone thinks they can, however.
118 Accordingly intentionally rotating leadership assures that all members eventually
119 realize they can lead the group, the leader has relief available, multiplication is
120 easier, and everyone has ownership of what is going on.

121 • Be flexible:

122

123 We did not have any idea what God had in mind as we started. We just knew that
124 it was something He wanted and thus were open to His leading. He far exceeded
125 our expectations. As surprises came along, we asked for His direction, waited
126 with a positive anticipation and were pleasantly surprised by the neat things God
127 brought with the surprises.

128

129 • Look to Jesus:

130

131 The most effective groups are those which are intentionally Christ-centered.
132 Small groups are not social gatherings. There is certainly a social element. In
133 fact the friendship that develop are often more meaningful than the friendships
134 developed otherwise. However, the glue that brings members together is Jesus.
135 He is also the source of wisdom, the power bringing about change, and the one
136 looked to in every aspect of the group's activities. The group leader's most
137 important task is to connect members to Jesus in such a way, that the connection
138 will continue during the week to come. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" should
139 be the watch phrase of the group.

140

141 • Make God your authority:

142

143 God's authority has to be the underpinning of all small group activity. The group
144 never has sufficient wisdom to think for individual members or take the place of
145 God. Neither does the group have the combined wisdom to solve practical
146 problems. Group members can offer suggestions and provide reality checks, but
147 ultimately the group's primary role is to confirm that others struggle with the
148 same issues, affirm that God cares, suggest God will provide the wisdom needed,
149 and commit to holding the person up as they seek to find God's wisdom and will
150 on the matter. Group members must resist becoming self-made counselors. The
151 words of Charles Trumbull are excellent in this regard:

152

153 "There is only One in the universe who can safely tell a man his duty as to the
154 details of everyday life and practice. Therefore it is our chief duty to lead our
155 fellows to that One, and to seek to win them to a loyal acceptance of Him as their
156 Head and Guide and Savior, so that He may settle their questions of duty for
157 them. It is never our duty to attempt to settle for our fellows such questions as
158 God intends they shall refer to Him. About the only duty that one man can safely
159 and unconditionally prescribe for another man is the supreme duty of surrender to
160 God's will."—Charles Trumbull, *Taking Men Alive*, p. 125.

161 • Believe in the way God is leading group members:

162

163 Fundamental to a healthy small group is the belief that we are fully redeemed as a
164 result of our personal faith in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. Recognizing
165 that every group member is equally saved on the basis of what Jesus has done
166 negates performance comparisons. All are sinners saved by grace. Successful
167 small groups also strongly believe individual members have been created in the
168 image of God and are being individually led by Him. Accepting the varying
169 ways God is working is critical to long-term success. Groups quickly get in
170 trouble when group-accepted ways of behaving becomes mandated.

171

172 • Be passionate about personal obedience:

173

174 The more the group is passionate about obedience, the more the group will
175 experience the power of God. This value cannot be proscribed, applies on an
176 individual basis, and must be modeled by the leader. As participants pursue
177 greater surrender, other group members will eventually share the same "whatever
178 the Lord says" conviction.

179

180 • Resist judging:

181

182 Because group members can become more "real," the group members may
183 become aware of areas where participants are struggling. It would be tempting to
184 legislate solutions if it were not recognized that changing hearts and behaviors are
185 God's responsibility. As the Bible is actively read and prayed over with others,
186 members will be individually convicted of areas of incomplete surrender. Instead
187 of the group pushing the person to change in guilt-producing ways, member will
188 encourage each other to look for Jesus to do what they cannot do for themselves.
189 I continue to be amazed at the radical changes that have been affected without a
190 single "you shouldn't" statement being made.

191

192 • Model servant leadership:

193

194 We strongly believe in servant leadership. We want to serve our members to
195 empower and equip them to work for God on this campus and in their world.

196

197 • Be supportive of the rest of church:

198

199 Paul clearly likened the church to a body where the members are joined in
200 mutually benefiting relationships. Success by the "hand" at the expense of the
201 "feet" is not really success. God-driven success that resulted in the revival and
202 soul winning occurring at Pentecost reflected a compassionate concern for the
203 health of the entire church. Groups should not be an end in themselves. Rather
204 they strengthen and equip members to be supportive of the greater church and
205 serve as God calls them. Leaders need to especially model positive support.

206 Resist complaining and judging. You will be better for it, and so will your
207 participants. Encourage them to put their energy into praying for the people and
208 circumstances that are annoying. God will be thus liberated to work in ways He
209 could not work otherwise.

210

211 • Allow members to safely be themselves:

212

213 A group cannot long survive if members do not feel safe to be themselves. The
214 ability to create a safe environment is dependent on group members realizing that
215 participants created in the image of God have feet of clay and need a safe place
216 where God can deal with the clay. Affirming recognition of who a person can
217 become in Christ, an awareness that we share similar struggles, and a respectful
218 commitment to help members become whole, creates the shared commitment to
219 provide a safe environment.

220

221 • Be appropriately transparent:

222

223 Being appropriately "real" will greatly further the group's success. Much can be
224 communicated in general terms without getting into specifics. Transparency is
225 about acknowledging struggles in group-affirming ways, not in potentially
226 debilitating self-disclosure. An "I'm struggling with finances" is more than
227 sufficient to garner prayer and encourage support.

228

229 • Bathe your group in prayer:

230

231 Prayer is the vehicle bringing change. Prayer is also the glue that opens and
232 cements group members to God. Accordingly group members should be
233 encouraged to pray for each other during the week. Group should start with
234 prayer. Group should conclude with prayer. Where possible, use brief—one to
235 two sentences—conversational prayers at the end to allow greater participation.
236 Use prayer sheets to educate on the subject of prayer and to note specific
237 requests. Encourage members to come to the Tuesday Prayer Group or "House
238 of Prayer" on Wednesday evening.

239

240 • Use icebreakers to connect group members:

241

242 Ice breaking questions and activities at the beginning of any session will open
243 group members to each other. Without these relationship-building activities,
244 group members will have difficulty deeply connecting with each other during
245 Bible study and prayer time.

246 • Encourage outreach:

247

248 A significant part of a group's excitement is praying for opportunities to witness,
249 and sharing the answers—bringing the results in some cases by bringing the
250 person being witnessed to—to the next meeting. Groups become stale without an
251 outer focus. Ultimately groups are about members becoming the people God can
252 use to reach others.

253

254 • Keep the barriers to success low:

255

256 The important point isn't whether you have the best trained leaders or the perfect
257 materials. The critical point is that a small group of individuals are coming
258 together in a small group context and experiencing the Lord Jesus together. The
259 lower you keep your barriers to participation and success, the more individuals
260 will feel equipped to participate and lead as necessary; the more groups will
261 easily replicate and spread throughout the church.

262

263

264 WHAT KINDS OF SMALL GROUPS ARE THERE?

265

266 • Traditional Groups (6 people at the Way; 8 to 10 elsewhere)

267 • Service Groups (centered on some shared service activity)

268 • Prayer Groups (For changing the campus and world through prayer)

269 • Life Transformation Group (Generally a gender-based mini group of three
270 people that multiplies every time it grows to four people)

271 • Life Impact Group (Similar to Life Transformation Group, but uses questions
272 about group members' spiritual walk)

273

274

WHAT DOES AN IMPACT GROUP SESSION INCLUDE?

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276

277 Small group meetings universally include relational icebreakers, study, prayer,
278 and outreach. Some groups include what I am calling "transformational"
279 questions. At the Way we also pass around a prayer pad and collect contact
280 information (where possible).

281

282 • Fellowship:

283

284 Many groups start with some time for fellowship. A "How has the week been?"
285 question quickly sets an informal tone to the gathering. Don't waste too much
286 time, but do encourage "reconnecting." Fellowship can also be furthered through
287 activities participated in at other times, such as a potluck for group members.

288

289 • Impact questions:

290

291 Some groups will inject some elements of accountability. Generally speaking
292 accountability groups are gender oriented and may not be appropriate at the Way.
293 However, carefully selected accountability questions can be included at any
294 group, will reduce the spiritual barriers between members and significantly
295 advance the life change process. A simple "Did we look more to Jesus than to
296 ourselves this week," opens a positive discussion of what the week has been like.
297 A "Were we consistent in our devotions" reminds and affirms the need for
298 ongoing personal time with Jesus. Impact questions are about loving
299 encouragement, not group judgment. Accordingly, feedback will often take the
300 form of "I'm glad to hear you are normal," rather than "How could you?" These
301 questions can be used as part of the fellowship time.

302

303 • Relational icebreakers:

304

305 The next thing should be a relational icebreaker. Members of a successful group
306 will enjoy close interpersonal relationships. These ties are greatly furthered by
307 ongoing ice breaking activities. Questions can include "Share something from
308 your wallet or purse that say something about your life?" Or "Describe your
309 week as a color, and why? What about "On a busy multi-lane highway, what lane
310 do your drive in? All of these questions are followed up with a specific question
311 relating to spiritual matters. For example the latter question could be followed up
312 with "What lane are you in your spiritual life, and why?" If possible, questions
313 should transition participants from the social discussion to the spiritual. Ice
314 breaking questions wonderfully bond members and sets the stage for the
315 discussion that will follow. The first question develops interpersonal bonds; the
316 second question develops spiritual bonds. Please make them more than silly
317 questions of only social value.

318

319 • Study:

320

321 Pure fellowship stagnates quickly without meaningful spiritual activities.
322 Ongoing study is critical to long-term success. Reading multiple chapters of the
323 Bible repeatedly in preparation for group is one of the better ways of assuring life
324 changing discussions take place. Keep your study simple and relating to how to
325 live on a daily basis. Small group isn't the place to bring commentaries and Bible
326 dictionaries. Allow the Bible to speak for itself. One of the easiest ways to study
327 is to read three or four verses and ask a series of questions: "What was God
328 trying to say to the people back then? What is He saying to us in our day and
329 situation? How do we stand relative to this? How can we apply these truths in a
330 life-changing way this week?"

331

332 • Prayer:

333

334 Just as prayer is fundamental to the Christian life, so prayer is key to any group's
335 vitality. In fact, early studies on prayer can be very helpful. Gatherings should
336 start and end with prayer. Conversational, popcorn, word, or "promise" prayers
337 can help new believers participate more easily. Prayer requests are always in
338 order. Use the prayer sheets to foster continued praying during the week.

339

340 • Outreach:

341

342 Healthy small groups are involved in outreach. Outreach opportunities should be
343 sought and encouraged. As group members work and pray for their friends,
344 roommates, teachers, and other acquaintances, a sense of anticipation and
345 purpose will grow. Nothing so energizes a group as ongoing testimonies about
346 what God is doing with outreach between meetings. Needless to say, group is the
347 perfect place to bring people being witnessed to. Outreach should be mentioned
348 as prayer requests are being taken, to allow praying for the various outreach
349 activities represented.

350

351

WHAT ARE NECESSARY SUCCESS FACTORS?

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353

354 For a group to succeed certain factors need to exist:

355

356 • Group has to be meaningful and bring blessings:

357

358 Failure to make gatherings enjoyable times of fellowships and spiritual growth
359 will doom the effort.

360

361 • Groups need to facilitate friendships:

362

363 A primary reason young adults join groups is to develop relationships with other
364 young adults. As one young adult put it, I join a group based on who is in the
365 group more than who is leading out. Groups need to facilitate friendships.

366

367 • Groups need to be user friendly:

368

369 Groups should be easy to invite others to, and efforts should be made to assure
370 that all attendees are participating, regardless of spiritual walk or denominational
371 background.

372

373 • Minimize formal leadership:

374

375 Make sure your group is not dependent on one person, or restricting leadership to
376 individuals with stipulated levels of training. A small group isn't a college
377 classroom. It is the place where students can be "real" and not feel like they are
378 being lectured.

379

380 • Remain Bible centered:

381

382 God seems to especially bless the Bible. It is also the least controversial of all
383 study materials and is fully accepted by individuals of all denominations.

384

385 • Avoid controversy:

386

387 Nothing will implode a group quicker than controversy.

388

389 • Affirm other commitments, relationships, and be sensitive to time:

390

391 Students have busy schedules and multiple commitments around campus. Affirm
392 those relationships and try to plan with their needs and time in mind. Encourage
393 students to participate in other activities and ministries. Only participating in
394 "Way" activities and having friends made at the Way is not healthy in the long
395 run. End meetings before group members tire of them, and don't require more
396 time than they can safely give.

397

398 • Be participative:

399

400 A guaranteed group killer is having one person dominate. Leaders are not there
401 to teach, but to experience the presence and power of God with group members,
402 and to discover God's word with them. The leader should only talk 20% of the
403 time.

404

405

406

ARE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE?

407

408 The Serendipity Bible for Personal and Small Group Bible Study

409 This Bible includes helpful questions on each section of the Bible, including ice-
410 breakers, study and apply questions, configured for a variety of groups.

411

412 Cultivating a Life for God by Neil Cole, Church Smart Resources, Carol Stream,
413 IL

414 Provides very helpful information on implementing Life Transformation Groups.
415 A must read for anyone wanting to start a mini group.

416

417 Experiencing God by Henry Blackaby, Broadman & Holman Publishers,
418 Nashville, TN

419 Blackaby's book has been very successfully used in a wide variety of settings.
420 Has a very meaningful workbook that some consider superior to the book.

421

422 How To Lead Small Groups by Neal McBride, Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO
423 Considered one of the best books on leading traditional groups.

424

425 Ice-Breakers and Heart-Warmers by Steve Sheely, Serendipity, Littleton, CO

426 Full of ice-breakers and other activities to start groups.

427

428 Starting (& Ending) A Small Group by Dan Williams, InterVarsity Press,
429 Downers Grove, IL

430 Many helpful suggestions on starting and ending small groups, including
431 establishing expectations, keeping groups interesting, getting members involved
432 in missions, and how to run a session.

NOTES

AUTHOR AND USE

Dan Augsburger, the author of this booklet, taught at the Andrews Theological Seminary over the course of ten years, has led seminars on Prevailing Prayer, the More Abundant Life, Revival, Small Groups, Relationships, Witnessing and the History and Secrets of Great Christians, in various places of the world with his wife Rose. Rose also makes presentations on witnessing and relationships, having formerly served as an Academy Bible Teacher and Bible Worker— in the latter role developing and maintaining a Church-based Bible Correspondence School. They also maintain their discipleheart.com and path2prayer.com website and correspond with individuals who seek their help.

Path2Prayer is a faith ministry and depends on the direction and blessings of God for success.

More resources on these subjects can be found at discipleheart.com. You can also contact Dan and Rose, and receive our Path2Prayer Newsletter, by writing us at discipleheart@protonmail.com

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