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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconcilliation in church and society.
An Insider’s Guide to Starting in Small Group Ministry

2nd Edition

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Introduction or Read Me First!

Before anything else, let’s begin with the encouraging words of Proverbs 3:56; “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Entering into the world of small group ministry in a college setting can be challenging, even for people with a wide range of experience. That being said, we are thankful God has led you and your group together to this place of small group leadership.

The first step is being willing to follow God’s calling. Trust in Him and he will pave the way for you. That does not mean that the road will always be easy or that every small group meeting will go exactly as you planned. It won’t at all. Small groups are messy. There is struggle and failure in following God’s calling, and small group ministry is no exception. With faithfulness and perseverance though, you and your group will experience God’s grace and transformative work.

We have found that an important step to success is to do a little homework. That’s why this guide was created. It is full of hints, tips, and tricks to get you on your way. It is not meant to be read in one sitting, and is all about practical application. Start at the beginning and read it through, or start in the middle with a topic that seems fitting for your group setting. This is meant to be a guide for YOU and your small group.

While we are not going to dictate how you use this reference, here are our suggestions for using this guide effectively:

- Spend some time in prayer and reflection. Where do you see this group going? What is the ultimate goal? What are the desires of your group members? What do dream of God doing with this group?
- Look at the first half of this guide, which is all about INDIVIDUAL group members. Where do you see different people in your group fitting in? How will you tailor your lessons and reflections to fit the people in your small group?
- Reflect: As a leader you are called to be a servant. How will you serve the people in your group and meet their individual needs?
- Then look at the second half of this guide. Read about the GROUP as a whole. How do you juggle group dynamics and differences to help people find meaning, collaboration, growth, and unity together?
- What are some approaches you can use to address any difficult dynamics you might encounter in your small group?
- How can you create an environment that is conducive to open communication and builds strong relationships?

“At the beginning of last spring, I was definitely feeling a little lost, but at the same time I felt God calling me to something and I wasn’t sure what that something was. Then my friend and I walked past the booth to sign up to become a Koinonia small group leader. We both had an urge that God was calling us to co-lead a group together. Even though we were both given a random group of girls, it was honestly one of the biggest blessings in disguise that God gave me that year.”

– Lauren Stratton 2016’
• Read your Bible. Spend time reflecting on scripture. Consider what the members of your group want to learn about or study. This is the bread and butter of your Bible study and the most important step.
• Finally, pray some more! Pray for the words to say and an attitude of loving kindness towards the members of your group. Invite God to join you in your walk together as a group and ask Him to move through you all as he sees fit.

And, there you have it; you are on your way already! The following pages are filled with ideas from a plethora of sources to help you continue to grow and develop as a small group leader.

In Part I, we will be studying individual members as components of your group. We will look at why people learn the way they do (learning styles), and what impacts different views on scripture (spirituality types).

In Part II, we will focus on the group as a whole. We’ll be thoroughly exploring the topics of group dynamics, navigating theological differences, communication, and relationship building. These are all crucial to the health of your small group. We have designed this section to be particularly ‘hands-on’ in terms of application. We hope you will be able to relate what you are reading to what is happening in your group so that there might be relevant and effective examples to apply to your group.

At the end of each section, we have also included some resources for further reading. If you want to learn more about a specific area, check these out. Good luck on your journey!
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Part I: Individuals

Learning Styles
Spirituality Types
Learning Styles

There are numerous ways of looking at different learning differences, but in this section, we will be focusing on two that will be the most helpful in your small group setting. These are the theory of multiple intelligences and the idea of 4mat learning styles.

Here is a brief overview of what they are, how to use them, and questions that you can use with your group to get them thinking about their learning differences.

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences:

After spending years doing cognitive research, Howard Gardner identified eight distinct intelligences. Gardner’s research and theory "documents the extent to which students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways," (1991). According to this theory, we all interpret the world through eight lenses, but we all differ in strengths across these different fields. Our strengths in these various intelligence lenses affect how we solve problems, learn new information, and develop relationships.

In your small groups, not everyone learns, likes reading the Bible, discussing scripture, or holding a conversation in the same way. The best thing that you can do is figure out everyone’s different strengths and let that guide you in your decision making as you tailor your studies towards these different intelligences.

What are the 8 different intelligences?

- **Visual-Spatial** – people with this dominant intelligence tend to think in terms of physical space. They tend to be very aware of their environments. They like to draw, do jigsaw puzzles, read maps, and daydream. They learn through drawings, verbal and physical imagery.

- **Bodily-kinesthetic** – people who are dominantly bodily-kinesthetic use their body effectively. They tend to have a keen sense of body awareness. They like movement, making things, and touching. They communicate well through body language and learn through physical activity, hands-on learning, acting out, and role playing.

- **Musical** – people with musical intelligence usually show sensitivity to rhythm and sound. They love music, but they are also sensitive to sounds in their environments. They may study better with music in the background. They can learn by turning lessons into lyrics, speaking rhythmically, and tapping out time.

- **Interpersonal** – they understand by interacting with others. People with this dominant intelligence tend to learn through interaction. They have many friends, empathy for others, street smarts. They learn through group activities and dialogues.

- **Intrapersonal** – People with this intelligence are good at understanding their interests, and goals. These learners tend to shy away from extremely large groups. They are in tune with their inner feelings; they have wisdom, intuition and motivation, as well as a strong will, confidence and opinions. They learn through independent study and introspection.
- **Linguistic** – people with this dominant intelligence are usually skilled at using words effectively. They have highly developed auditory skills and often think in words. They like reading, playing word games, and making up poetry or stories. They learn best when they say and see words, or read books.

- **Logical -Mathematical** – people with this intelligence tend to be reasoning and calculating. They think conceptually, abstractly and are able to see and explore patterns and relationships. They like to experiment, solve puzzles, and ask cosmic questions. They learn through logic games, investigations, and mysteries. They usually need to learn and form concepts before they can deal with details.

- **Naturalistic** - people with this intelligence are often able to recognize and classify different types of plants or animals. They often enjoy observing and recording data or creating a "living system" for the material they are trying to learn. They like to imagine new material as an ecosystem or a pattern for them to figure out. They usually learn by writing about nature, daily life, or people.

So, how do you figure out your own dominant intelligence or the dominant intelligence of individual group members? Well, by reading the descriptions, some people may be able to pick out their dominant intelligence. If not, there are a lot of online quizzes that can help you to determine your strengths. One particularly good survey for this purpose can be found at: http://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-assessment. This is a quiz we have used in our groups, and while it is not perfect, it can help people in your group get a rough idea of what intelligence type(s) they possess.

**Why is this important?**

Multiple Intelligences are not always 100% accurate, but they can give you a good idea about how to engage different individuals in different ways. It is often said that you teach the way you prefer learn. Planning for learning differences can make your group satisfying and effective for everyone involved.

**How to adapt lessons for…**

- **Visual Spatial** – people in this category like to see things and have an idea of where things go, or what they look like. A way to adapt lessons for this type of learner could focus on drawing a picture or diagram to explain the passage you are studying, or doing a puzzle to figure out a theme or concept. These people might do well with an active group opener like a scavenger hunt. Another way to get them involved would be using maps of the places you are studying in the Bible. If they can visualize what concepts you are talking about, it will be easier for them to understand and respond to them.

- **Bodily-Kinesthetic** – This learning style focuses a lot on movement. A way to engage peers with this learning type could be a game as an icebreaker, or moving around during an activity. One way to really get kinesthetic people engaged could include taking a walk while talking about a Bible passage or praying. When they are moving, they have an easier time processing and understanding, so get them up and moving!
- **Musical** – People with this intelligence very obviously like music. Try incorporating a song into your reflection time or choose one to discuss that fits with your study. You could have it on as background music as people are gathering, or as way to help people reflect on a certain topic.

- **Interpersonal** – Interpersonal people like being around other people. In a lot of ways, small groups are meant for interpersonal people because you are studying in a group. However, you need to make sure you are interacting like a group! Interpersonal people learn and process by discussing ideas and bouncing thoughts off people. If you are spending too much time having everyone silently reflect, you will not be stimulating many interpersonal tendencies. Try group discussions about an issue or a question that can be answered through conversing and looking at the Bible.

- **Intrapersonal** – Many people think intrapersonal people are the opposite of interpersonal. However, that is not the case. Intrapersonal people do not dislike being around others, they simply process ideas best in their own heads. Good ways to structure small group interactions for these people should include quiet times to reflect or study a passage independently. They may not come up with an idea to share immediately, but if you wait and give them time to think, they will probably come up with a thought or reaction to your question.

- **Linguistic** – These learners like to read and write. They are good with language and like to manipulate it. A way to engage them could be as simple as having them read the passage ahead of time or reading it out loud during your time together. They also do well producing language, so they might enjoy writing a poem or song, paraphrasing a passage in their own words or writing a short reflection on what they are thinking about a certain passage, topic of study, or question.

- **Logical-Mathematical** – Logical-mathematical learners work best when they are faced with large, applicable concepts rather than small details that do not relate. They like puzzles and manipulation. An activity to do with people who dominantly fall into this type of intelligence could include exploring large themes throughout the duration of a book of the Bible or larger ideas that can be seen throughout the entire work rather than the details of one passage.

- **Naturalists** – Naturalists like to be outside in nature. Adapting for them could be as easy as moving your study into the grass out front of your dorm. They also like to see the interconnectedness of the world so relating a piece of scripture to different people in different environments can be very stimulating for them.
4 Mat Learning Styles:

Learning styles are different from the multiple intelligences because they focus more specifically on how people process information. These styles actually directly correlate with ideas on how to engage each type of learner. First let’s look at McCarthy’s (2006) perspective of four different learning styles.

- **Imaginative - wants to know WHY**
  - The imaginative type likes being absorbed in feelings and spending time reflecting, seeking personal meaning and involvement. Imaginative people are focused on personal values for themselves and others and making connections. Favorite question: Why?

- **Analytical - wants to know WHAT**
  - The analytic type likes listening to and thinking about information, seeking facts, thinking through ideas, formulating ideas - and learning what the experts think. Favorite question: What?

- **Dynamic - wants to know What if?**
  - The dynamic type likes doing and feeling. They are constantly seeking hidden possibilities and exploring ideas to create original adaptations, they learn by trial and error and self-discovery. Favorite question: What if?

- **Common Sense - wants to find out How?**
  - The common sense type likes thinking and doing. People with this type are most happy experimenting, building and creating usability. They like tinkering and applying useful ideas. Favorite question: How?

If you do not know what your dominant learning style is, check out the quiz in the appendix entitled “4-Mat Learning Styles Quiz.” This should help you to get a better grasp of what style you fall under, and you can use it as a resource with your group.

**How to Adapt Lessons for each learning style:**

When looking at these 4-mat learning types, it is easy to see them as a way to put people into boxes. We urge you to use them for the opposite purpose, to bring people out of the boxes that they put themselves in and adapt a lesson so that everyone can relate, everyone can be engaged, and everyone can be included. When we look at our four types, they line up perfectly with a widely used approach to structuring small group meetings. This is called the HBLT method, which stands for Hook, Look, Book and Took. This method was created by Lawrence O Richards and Gary J Bredfildt in 1998. The Hook part of this handy little acronym is usually geared towards imaginative learners, Book is geared towards analytic learners, Look is geared towards dynamic learners, and Took is geared towards common sense learners. Here is a quick overview of each specific part of this structure and how to use it effectively for different learning styles:
- **Hook** – the hook of your lesson is the introduction. What are you going to do to get your peers engaged and interested in what you are talking about? This is a good idea for imaginative learners because they like to think outside of the box. They like to find meaning and make connections. An example of a hook you could use is asking a thought-provoking question at the beginning of your meeting to get people thinking (just don’t forget to discuss it later!) or starting off with a game or role-playing activity.

- **Book** – this section is directed towards the analytic learner for obvious reasons. This type usually likes to look at things in-depth or study them intensely. Book learners may appreciate an inductive study\(^1\) of a passage, doing a word study, or using reference books to look for historical background. The whole point here is to really get in Bible and analyze it.

- **Look** – Dynamic learners tend to crave a “look” portion during Bible study. This is a portion where discussion happens. So, say you have finished really analyzing a passage, dynamic learners like to discuss its meaning. This could take the form of answering different questions and learning everyone’s thoughts, or it could be a general discussion where a passage is open for interpretation. Try using some “what if” questions to really get dynamic thinkers interested, and get conversation going.

- **Took** – common sense learners often need a take-away portion of a Bible study. After discussion, try coming up with ideas for practical application. Whether it is something to be working on in the coming week, a notecard with a Bible verse written on it that they can memorize or re-read. They like to apply what they learned, so hands-on construction of a craft, or piece of art that reminds them of your lesson can be very meaningful to them.

Sometimes it can be difficult to incorporate all of these ideas into one lesson, and we are not saying that you have to for every small group meeting that you have, but following this outline can help provide a well-rounded lesson for your group. It is important to be aware of these styles so that when you are teaching, you are not catering to one and are helping people to learn in their preferred style.

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\(^1\) This simply means using specific information from a passage to reach a conclusion. It is not about pulling ideas from one’s own life, but actually finding scriptural justification for something.
Additional Resources


- This is a summary of the 4 MAT learning styles that are included above. This source can provide background for in-depth studies or analysis of larger group dynamics. Look at this if you are struggling to decide what learning style someone possesses.


- This is a book about lesson designing. This is a good resource for leaders who have one person who they are continuously struggling to reach with their Bible studies. However, this source was NOT written for small group settings, but rather, larger educational settings. Be careful of the biases it contains towards a classroom setting.
Spirituality Types

These are similar to learning differences, but these categories describe the 4 predominant ways people see and interact with God. Understanding spirituality types can do wonders to help you better understand how to meet each individual’s needs in a small group setting and can help you anticipate how a person might respond to a study.

The Chart:

The chart below is one illustration created by the Messiah College Pastors that shows how different people experience their spiritual lives.

![Diagram of Four Spirituality Types](image)

The vertical axis reflects different ways people perceive and experience God. Some people take a more intellectual approach to their spiritual lives, so they tend to fall at the top of our spectrum. Other people experience a more affective, or feelings-based approach to seeking and knowing God. These people would find themselves closer to the bottom of the spectrum. The horizontal axis reflects how we perceive God. Some people predominantly understand God and revealed and use images, concepts, and symbols to relate to God they can know. Other Christians who see God as ultimately unknowable, or as a mystery, will try to comprehend God through contemplation or quiet reflection.
After reading this description, it may be easy or challenging to place yourself in a section. Try taking this quiz if you are still unsure: https://apps3.messiah.edu/spirituality_survey/. It can help you to get a better idea of your spirituality type or that of others.

**What do I do with this information?**

Learning about spirituality types can be done in a few different ways. You could try to figure out what tendencies people in your group have and structure lessons to work for everyone, similarly to the application of different learning styles. Another way to structure this is to spend time over several weeks to reflect as a group on each of your spirituality types, and trying out different modes of worship or prayer based on the different types. Here are some more in-depth descriptions of each of the spirituality types and some activities you could do with each.

**Activist** – People with this spirituality type connect with God through serving, doing and relating. They are good at leading and influencing others while valuing competence and knowledge. Activists tend to be agents of change, which they can be respected or opposed for. They are willing to make sacrifices in their personal life in hopes of seeing the kingdom come. They can sometimes become impatient when other people do not share their drive and passion and fit best with others who share their visions. Activists also have to be careful not to become too involved because they can neglect their inner self. It is important to be aware of this as an activist and take care of your personal spiritual well-being.

**Ways to worship like an activist may include**… doing something for the local community like serving at a food bank or homeless shelter, or it could be baking cookies for a friend who needs some love because they are going through a rough patch. Working like an activist involves going out and doing things, talking to, or supporting other people.

**Contemplative** – Contemplative Christians like to live a life of quiet reflection and value harmony and peace. Monks are a prime example of the contemplative lifestyle. This type tends to spent time in quiet, prayerful worship as a way to become united with God. Ways that contemplative souls find more of a connection with God could include taking a silent walk and praying or meditating on scripture. They may enjoy mulling over a passage or an idea for a long period of time before reaching a conclusion or writing poetry, making art, or taking time for silent prayer.

**Ways to worship like a contemplative may include**… practicing “Lectio Divina” or the art of reading through the scriptures slowly and meditating on and praying about them. This style does not put emphasis on looking at the scriptures as something to be studied, but focuses on slow reading and prayerful seeking, and as a way of increasing one’s relationship with God. It can be tried with a Psalm or two as a starting point, but can be done with any scripture.

**Pietist** – People with this spirituality type tend to value feelings and emotions and the added dimension that they bring to their spirituality. They value freedom and independence and are the people who truly know how to experience joy. They are able to experience God in the moment
and are able to live in the present. They tend to see God as a nurturing parent and prayer tends to focus on what is on their hearts at any given moment. Pietists also tend towards missions because they think that real faith should be shared. They are passionate about holy living and various forms of outreach, however, their impulsive behavior can sometimes get them into trouble because when they are hyper-focused on the present, they can forget to invest in long-term goals. Pietists are also sometimes criticized for giving the impressions that they are more spiritual than people with other spirituality types.

**Ways to worship like a pietist may include…** extemporaneous prayer. Have people pray out loud everything that comes to their mind. Try not to have a huge agenda, but pray as random thoughts come to you. If your group struggles with this, try taking a walk and pray for anything that you encounter along the way.

**Scholar** – A scholar’s intellect is dominant when they think about God and the Bible. They focus more on learning about and studying the manifestation of God and Jesus in scripture rather than focusing on inner reflection or personal devotion. They also believe that spiritual direction comes from the Bible and the Holy Spirit. Scholars tend to appreciate prayers that are theologically grounded and are attracted to churches or Bible studies in which the Word is central. They tend to see details that other people may have overlooked. The biggest shortcoming of scholars is that they can seem too intellectual and unfeeling to the other spirituality types. If you fall in this category, make sure that you do not neglect your emotional side. Scholars may enjoy studying a particular passage in-depth or applying ideas from the Bible directly to their calling or life.

**Ways to worship like a scholar may include…** focusing on one specific text for a long amount of time. Read it once for understanding, then go through and pick it apart. Ask questions, look at the nuances of word-choice, or look up the original Hebrew or Greek that it was written in. Try to find meaning in the passage that you might have overlooked the first time you read through it.

So, there you have it—a list of the different types, an explanation of how each type tends to live out their faith, and ideas on how they might worship. Now, these ideas or tendencies are not set in stone and you could have someone in your group that identifies as one of these types, but does not agree with the description. This is bound to happen, and it does not mean that they are wrong; it just means that humans don’t always fit into neat little boxes!

Now you are probably thinking *how am I going to use all of this information now that I have it?* Well, you could do so much with it!
Incorporating Spirituality Types into Your Small Group:

Some of these suggestions are mine, and some are based off of suggestions made by the college pastors here at Messiah College. You can read more of their suggestions here: http://www.messiah.edu/documents/college_ministries/SpiritualFormationBooklet.pdf but here is a brief overview of some great ideas to do with your group that revolve around the different spirituality types.

- Ask your group members what they think their spirituality type is after you read the descriptors, or have them take the test online during one of your first meetings. This is a great way to get to know more about a person spiritually without having to ask them for their testimony. Instead of asking someone what their favorite color it, asking them how they worship Jesus can give you more information about what they are really looking to get out of your small group.

- Spend a few weeks going over the different types as a group. Study people in the Bible who were the different types, or ask people to tell about an experience they have had worshiping like each spirituality type.

- Pray or study scripture like each of the types. It does not have to all be at once, and you don’t even have to come out and say “ok, now we are reading this passage like a scholar”, but make an effort to include different ways of structuring your small group based on what spirituality types that you see present.

- Have people pick the spirituality type that is most unlike theirs and try spending an hour praying, worshipping, or reading like that spirituality type. This helps people step outside their comfort zone and experience God in a new way.

- You could discuss how spirituality types relate to learning styles. Look at what each person’s learning style is and how that relates to their spirituality type. For example, Sam is dominantly an interpersonal learner. Group work is her favorite, and she loves people. This makes sense with her spirituality type because she is dominantly an activist. Sam loves being around, talking to, and serving other people. It’s interesting to see how this same repeating pattern can be seen for people in your group. It may even seem that someone’s spirituality type is different from their dominant learning style, which is cool too. This is an interesting way to examine how people best learn and how they interact with God.

- And there are probably a billion more ways to incorporate these ideas, but there are just a few to get you started. Be creative!
Additional Resources


- This book published by Intervarsity includes practical approaches to teaching based on different learning styles. Pay special attention to Chapter 4, “Developing Disciples”.


- This is the guide that the college pastors put together detailing different spirituality types. It is super informative and worth the read.


- Look here for detailed descriptions of the different spirituality types. This would work well as a guide for you if you are struggling to fully understand one or all of the spirituality types. Chapter 3 describes them all in-depth.
Part II: Group Dynamics
Navigating Theological Differences
Communication
Relationship Building
Dynamics

Group dynamics can be hard to manage, and they are impossible to fake. We want your group to have healthy interaction and communication. In this section, we want to look at an overview of what you should be looking for in the dynamic of your small group, steps you can take to make it better, and activities your group can do to increase healthy interaction.

What should you look for?

In a word—community. While it is a buzz word that is largely overused here at Messiah, it is truly what we are all looking for. We want a community of believers that can share and open up to one-another during your small group meeting. When looking for healthy dynamics, we need to look for a strong sense of community. If that is lacking we end up with people saying things like “hey, what was your name again?” or “I’m just here for the Bible study, I don’t really need new friends.” When you end up hearing something like that, you know your dynamics are not where they should be. What you should look for instead is:

- **People are regularly attending and want to be there.**
  - This is often the hardest thing to regulate in a small group setting because people are busy in college. It is crucial that in the beginning of the year, the members of your group make a commitment to come every week. Contact people who miss out on meetings and stress its importance. Remember, to remind your group that it’s hard to build trust when people are in and out of the study. Most people are joining a small group to meet people, and build relationships. Stressing that committing to coming every week is crucial to this process will ensure that people make it a priority to come.

- **People are willing to talk and share about their personal lives.**
  - Now, this may not be instantaneous, but you want to make sure that set expectations as a group so that people know that they can open up and share without feeling judged and knowing that people will not share the information outside of the group meeting. A way to build this trust is by sharing first. As the leader, model what sharing looks like, and show that you trust your group enough to talk about personal matters. Your members will rarely go deeper than you do, so don’t avoid hard conversations.

- **People develop friendships and meet up outside of the group setting.**
  - This is not saying that you all have to be best buds. If you were randomly assigned, it is likely that you will not all be best friends, but having accountability partners, prayer buddies, or planning fun activities outside of your normal weekly meeting will help you all to bond and become better friends. These shared experiences are critical in the beginning. Eat dinner together in Lottie, go to a soccer game, watch a movie, or binge on pizza.
Stages of a group:

Group dynamics will change as your group develops. The three main ideas that we touched on above will be important during the start-up of your group, but here is what to expect as your group continues to meet. These stages were created by Long, Beyerlein, Keiper, Pell, Thiel & Whallon (1995) for InterVarsity small groups. See the additional resources section at the end of this section if you would like to read more about these stages. We have also included a “time frame” of when you are likely to see each of these stages occurring in your small group so that you can be better prepared on your journey thought out the semester. However, this is not an exact science, so your group may work through these stages a bit slower or a bit faster.

**Stage 1: Start-up – Time frame: August - September**

- This is the beginning stage of your group. People come feeling the desire for stronger relationships, or a need to find a group of people they can open up to. However, we often also come with doubt. We don’t know who else will be in the group or what to expect on the first meeting. It is important to talk about the purpose of your group. Why are you even bothering to meet? Brainstorm as a group and decide what you all want to get out of it. Share some of your story too and why you want to be a small group leader. This shows the members that you are dedicated and they are more likely to commit to a group. Also, don’t be disappointed if a person who originally signed up decides not to come. Sometimes people just don’t hit it off. Don’t take it personally. It is also important in this stage not to rush people into sharing. Let them get to know each other more superficially, and build trust before you ask people to share deeper ideas.

  - **The Leader’s Role: Vision-Caster**

**Stage 2: Shake-up – Time frame: October - December**

- This is the stage where people tire of superficial questions and are ready to share more openly about deeper topics. Trust grows, and people are more honest and friendly with each other. You may have people who stop coming at this stage. Ask them why. Don’t be afraid of some helpful criticism and take their advice. Ask them to come back to the group and try to make a healthier environment for everyone. This can be a period of turmoil as people test boundaries and continue to evaluate the group. Even if it gets weird, trust that God is still working through you and the group. Try your hardest to work through conflict in a healthy way.

  - **The Leader’s Role: Community Builder**

**Stage 3: Live-it-up - Time frame: January-April**

- During this stage people have become more confident in their place in the group. They are ready to fulfill roles and have developed friendships. They will begin to take
initiative in planning activities or brainstorming ideas to talk about. Sometimes leaders with groups in this stage feel unneeded, but that is not the case. At this stage, leaders can really focus on giving group members opportunities to develop their strengths and to share in ministry. This is when you as a leader can begin to take more of a mentoring role, encouraging and nurturing your group member’s good ideas and gifts.

- The Leader’s Role: Mentor

Stage 4: Wrap-it-up – Time frame: May

- This happens at the end of the year when everyone is getting ready to transition into the summer months. It can seem easy to shout “see-ya” at the last group meeting, but because everyone in your group has developed a deep bond, they need some sort of closure, something which most of us are bad at in the midst of final exams. It is a good idea to review all that your group has gone through together, highlighting both bright spots and disappointments. This is an opportunity to grow as a small group leader, and for people in your group to reflect back on their expectations. Did you meet the purpose that you set way back in the start-up stage? Have some time for people to write letters of affirmation to each other or go around and affirm each person individually out loud. People can write down their favorite memory or share it out loud. Give people some time to reflect on personal growth. Even if your group is planning on meeting again the next year, reflection and closure is a good way to end the year. Also, try not to do this the week of finals! People tend to be stressed and overworked at this time in the semester, and it might not be a great idea to pile this on them too. Try shooting for the week before, but ultimately do whatever feels most comfortable for your group.

- The Leader’s Role: Sender
The First Meeting:

So, now that you have a play-by-play of what to expect as far as what overall positive group dynamics should look like, and how your group will progress through the year, it may be helpful, to have a few tips for your first meeting, to make sure that you are developing this healthy system from the start.

1. Before the first meeting, reflect on your role in the group. What does it mean to be a small group leader? Where do you want this group to go? Have some ideas about goals as you go into this and be prepared to discuss them with your group members.

2. Think about your location. Where do you want to meet? Look for somewhere that is quiet and where you won’t be disturbed. You want to be able to have conversations, so meeting in a floor lounge where other people are studying is a bad idea. Also, think about snacks. It might seem silly, but sharing food together is an easy way to help people bond. You can even use your snack as an icebreaker activity. For example, have everyone take a handful of M&Ms and then ask them to share one thing about themselves for each color they have. It can be simple, but it provides an easy transition into the rest of your meeting.

3. You don’t necessarily want to be giving mini-sermons every week, but you want to reflect on a passage or come up with some talking points. For the first meeting, you do not want have a big discussion planned. Your first week may look more like a devotion squashed behind a bunch of icebreakers. In the future you can expand on this, but the first meeting should be based on getting to know each other and establishing some expectations for the year.

4. Remember you are not a pastor, you are a facilitator. Try not to turn ideas or questions into a lecture. Hear what your group has to say and ask questions to get them talking. Leading is more about building conversation than giving a sermon. If topic gets off track, let it go for a little while. This is your first meeting, so you want it to be relaxed and comfortable. Be confident and lead strongly, but also be open and approachable.

5. Start with introductions – this could be a silly game or it could be going around in a circle and saying names and majors. Don’t ask for super deep information yet. Let people begin to get to know each other casually first.

6. After people know each other’s names, talk about the purpose that everyone sees the group serving. Let people talk, discuss, and take some notes, then summarize it back to everyone to make sure everyone is on the same page. You can talk about commitment, possible topics of study, and what everyone is looking to get out of your weekly meetings.

7. Plan a time to set a time for a weekly meeting. You might have randomly picked the night for the first meeting, but take some time to see what works best for everyone’s

“Set the stage for your group - describe the atmosphere you want to create, the props you'll use, and the parts to be played. But remember to tell them that no one should be acting - they should come as they are.”

– Annette Kolb 2017’

“Set high expectations - even if at first they aren't well received, set them anyways. Make it very clear how this group is a priority to you; that you are committed setting aside some time to meet together once a week; that you are dedicated to meeting for meals periodically throughout the week to build relationships; that above all you are wholeheartedly prepared to pray for each member collectively and individually.”

– Richelle Corty 2014’
8. **Do some more icebreakers.** Have people get up and moving and interacting. It is important that you gear this time towards different types of people. Not everyone will be comfortable being super active, so try to plan for different types of people. Let this be fun and relaxing, but also try to have some activities focus on facts about people or basic information. Once again, don’t force people to become closer than they are willing to get. For example, it might not be the best idea to make people smell each other’s socks. That’s not cool for a first meeting. Avoid embarrassing situations that might make people feel uncomfortable or threatened.

9. **Pray.** Pray for your group and your members as you set off on a new journey together. Pray that you can all be honest with each other and are dedicated to coming each week. Take prayer requests, as you should every week, but again, don’t force people to share.

10. **Wrap up** and end. Encourage people to stay around and chat and get to know each other better.

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Our first meeting was a small disaster. The room I requested to use that evening was locked and then our back-up plan was also being used. Finally we got the RD to open the room, so we began significantly after our original start time. Here is what was shared that first night: one girl battling cancer and the struggles associated with it, one girl whose younger sister died in a car accident that past summer, another girl facing a recent diagnosis of epilepsy and discovering how to live with that, and finally a senior placed in the group by her roommate who was less than excited to be in a group of sophomores and juniors. Needless to say, I left that first meeting saying to God, what on earth have I gotten myself into? How am I going to lead a group of ladies whose problems seem monstrous compared to my own? But He just kept reminding me that this was his plan and I needed to trust him. I could hear Him say, ‘seriously Richelle - these girls just poured out their hearts to you.’ As time progressed, small group Wednesday nights became my most looked forward to event of the week. I had no idea how the girls in my group would come to be my closest friends, my future roommates, and the people I still remain in contact with after my time at Messiah College. When we look back on that first meeting, we laugh at how it went and smile too, because God knew just who we needed to be placed in our lives at that very moment!”

– Richelle Corty 2014’
How do you fit into all of this: Teaching vs. Facilitating?

Dynamics can be tough, especially when you are not quite sure where you fit in. As noted above, you are **not** a pastor and are **not** expected to give a sermon every week. Actually, it is a really bad idea to give a sermon to your small group every week. You are a *facilitator*. In technical language, you want to focus more on discovery learning and less on direct instruction. This means asking questions instead of giving answers.

**Don’t**: Give direct instruction

- This is the sermon we’re talking about – try not to tell your group members what you think they need to know from a passage. This is not engaging and feels like class.
- It does not increase the community atmosphere in your group, but rather creates mentality that is “me vs. them”.
- It does not give people a time to talk and new ideas are not expressed. People may also be afraid to ask questions.

**Do**: Discovery learning

- Ask questions and let people answer. In doing this, you are not giving one right answer, but are letting people decide for themselves what a passage is trying to communicate.
- It increases community because people work together to find the meaning behind scripture and can bounce ideas and stories off of each other to lead to richer conclusions.
- If you come up with guided questions, you can help people to learn at their own pace, give people time to talk and express new ideas.

But what if no one is talking? Well, that is a valid point. You can ask as many questions as you want, but if no one is sharing, you are not going to get anywhere. Try asking a question and having group members reflect on it for a minute or two before answering. Do not be afraid of awkward silence! You can also try sharing first. Getting some ideas out there may open up the floor for other ideas or more discussion. You could also try rephrasing. People may not understand what you are asking. Lastly, sometimes a question falls flat and no one has anything to say. That’s ok too! Not everything you say or do will go perfectly. Don’t panic! Just move on to the next idea.
Troubleshooting: The Disastrous Dynamic

Here is a vignette, a play-by-play if you will, of a small group meeting. It will not end well, but we will take some time to troubleshoot at the end and reflect on how you, as a small group leader, can avoid a group dynamic that looks like this:

Dave just started leading a small group and he is super excited to get together with some of the guys on his floor. They just started meeting a few weeks ago, but people in his group seem to be getting along ok and have been interacting outside of the group meeting time. He is super pumped to start a discussion on Matthew, and has spent some time planning out what questions he is going to ask. When he sits down, Dave is surprised to see that quite a few of his group members are missing. One of the other guys makes a comment that they are at a soccer game. Dave silently wishes that they would have talked more about commitment during the first meeting. However, Dave is happy to see that the majority of the group is present, and so they dive right in.

For the first activity, Dave asks a few guys to read the chapter that they are currently studying out loud. Sean mispronounces some of the names of people as he reads which incites a few chuckles from Pete who is sitting across the room checking his phone every few minutes. After finishing reading the chapter, Dave begins with his questions. Steve and Matt answer the questions quickly, but few others seem willing to share. Sean looks like he wants to say something, but volunteers little. This continues through most of the questions and a few of the guys have started to look like they have checked out. Dave wraps up what they have talked about that night and asks if anyone has any prayer requests. He is met with silence. Not wanting to force people to share, he goes ahead and prays, then dismisses and tells everyone that he will see them next week. Everyone leaves, but Sean sticks around and chats with Dave about his thoughts on the chapter. Dave wonders to himself why Sean had not volunteered any answers during discussion time, because it would have added to the conversation. Dave asks Sean to try to share more during their next meeting. Sean says he will try, but looks dubious. Dave says goodnight, and heads back to his room slightly discouraged.
**Reflection time:** Take a minute to reflect about how you would have handled this situation if you were Dave.

What could Dave have done differently in previous meetings to develop a better group dynamic?

How could Dave have dealt with Pete and the guys who didn’t show up differently?

What could Dave say to Steve and Matt to prevent them from dominating the conversation every week?

How could Dave better involve Sean and encourage him to share his thoughts with the group?
The Final Question:

Take a second to answer this question. Write it down. Seriously! You will need it later. After reading this entire section, you probably have a good idea on how to better foster a healthy group dynamic. Think about what this will mean in your group and how you will get there. Then answer this question.

1. At the end of the year, in our relationships with each other, our small group will consist of people who:

2. We will work towards this goal by:

Have you answered it? Really reflected on it? Good. Now, take all of the things we talked about in this section and apply them towards your goal. Come back and look at it in a month, half-way through the semester, and at the end of the semester. Have you been moving towards this goal? If not, what can you do to continue to make this goal a priority?
Additional Resources


- This includes a lot of information about the phases of group development. For a deeper understanding, check out Chapter 7 and 8 “Guiding through Phases” and “Cultivating Group Ownership”.


- Look at Chapter 15 “Having Meaningful Gatherings” if you are struggling to get people to really dive into the word or open up and share their thoughts. If you are struggling with hidden agendas, try reading Chapter 16.
Navigating Theological Differences

We were a melting pot of theological views. Coming into our first-year at Messiah, my (Stephen’s) small group quickly realized two things: 1) We were all very passionate about growing in our faith and spreading the gospel 2) Most of us had different beliefs about how that should happen and why it should look that way. It was only natural of course—we came from a multitude of different backgrounds, traditions, and places of worship. We had different understandings of biblical interpretation, church history, and personal experience. We were taught that we were right—and that everyone else was wrong. Or at least that’s what our impressionable and still immature selves had gathered from our adolescent years 😊

You can guess then what happened frequently during our meetings: Disagreements. Debates. Arguments. As a first-year and first-time small group leader, it was overwhelming at times. It was for everyone. But we didn’t give up; we didn’t stop meeting; we didn’t stop talking. That was never a serious option for us.

Though it seemed like a baptism by fire at times, we stayed together for four years learning to disagree in healthy, faithful ways. We learned to really listen to one another. We learned to strive for mutual growth and understanding. We learned to challenge one another firmly, but also gracefully. We learned to find God in what the other person was saying. We learned to ask good questions, and we learned to live with each other’s questions that we couldn’t answer. We learned that the goal isn’t necessarily to prove that you’re right or convince the other person to change their view. We learned that what we have in common is more precious that what we didn’t.

SO…

Now that we’re a little further down the road, we hope our experience can help you navigate theological differences and speak to your personalized situation:

Maybe this is a very exciting topic in small group ministry and you’re looking to take your group to the next level…

- Do you wish your group had greater theological conversation, but you just don’t know how to foster that depth, excitement, or interest related to thinking theologically?
- Does your group have a desire to explore important controversial subjects while maintaining a focus on mutual respect and growth?
Maybe this is a really uncomfortable or unfamiliar part of leading a small group…

- Does it scare you at all thinking about the fact that your small group members may represent a plethora of different Christian beliefs and/or traditional backgrounds?
- Do you just wish you knew more about the different traditions and controversial topics in the Christian faith so that you’re more equipped to facilitate discussion in your group about this subject?

Maybe this is a sensitive subject because you’ve had a bad experience, and you desire so much more for the church, for your small group…

- Have you ever been frustrated with a group that just can’t have a healthy discussion over a disagreement because aimless arguing and attacking takes over?
- Are you ever saddened, hurt, or bothered by the hatred Christians express toward one another over a difference in theological beliefs because you’re passionate about building unity?

We pray that this section will give you a conceptual and practical guide to wrestling with and hopefully answering some of those questions.

**Principles**

We’ll begin with five overarching conceptual principles that will set the stage for proceeding practically.

1. **Unity in diversity** - As mentioned above, my small group was diverse. Protestants and Catholics; Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Evangelicals, and Charismatics; Christian Universalists and Calvinists; those who spoke tongues and those who had never heard such a thing; those who considered themselves pacifists and those who considered war completely justified; those who supported LGBT marriage and those that opposed it. And you know the other dimension to this reality of diversity? People change (particularly college students), and their theological beliefs with them. Sometimes even drastically. If your small group unity is based on theological commonality, what happens if a member in your group of conservative evangelicals comes to more liberal conclusions about scripture and faith? Is he or she no longer a part of the group? In fact, if that’s the principle you would have used for my group, then I don’t think any of us would have been allowed to stay in the same group. Most of our views on certain theological beliefs shifted; some more than others and many times in different directions.

It begs the question, what does unity really mean? What does it look like? When the Apostle Paul admonishes the Corinthian church saying, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ…that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (*New International Version*, 1 Corinthians 1.10), does Paul really want complete uniformity? Should we literally be “perfectly united in mind and thought”? Would this demand Christians agreeing on everything?
Well Christian thought isn’t completely uniform on how to interpret these questions (surprise, surprise!). What we would like to point out is that Paul discusses what he terms as “disputable matters” in Romans 14. The church in Rome had different perspectives on what food was appropriate to eat. Some in the church ate everything (no food is unclean), others in the church considered some food unclean. Paul even acknowledges that there will be those in the church that choose to disagree with his outlook, and yet he doesn’t seem to be bothered by that reality. The climax of Paul’s writing is not a decisive conclusion about which side has got it right, but rather counsel to seek unity amidst diversity, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). In this case, Paul’s message is more about refraining from “judgment” or “showing contempt” in the midst of disagreement than convincing everyone to agree.

Byron Borger, the co-owner of Hearts and Minds bookstore in Dallastown, PA, touches beautifully on this subject when he writes in his blog, “Not all viewpoints are equally consistent with Biblical truth or appropriate for the faithful, and it is never acceptable to disregard Scriptural teaching, but surely there are some issues on which we might agree to disagree, without breaking fellowship or using words like apostasy.”

We never felt the need to break fellowship. Why? It wasn’t just that the community was too precious to disrupt for the sake of unified theology, but also that the theological diversity brought with it an opportunity that was not there before. With all of these different outlooks, we were learning new things about our God and Christian faith. We pushed each other to think more critically, faithfully, and holistically about faith engaging the world. We motivated each other to seek more intimately, pray more fervently, and study more thoroughly. As we wrestled with divergent perspectives, it revealed to us new ways to see God at work in this world. As we heard from one another about different traditions and theological beliefs shaping who they are and how they live, our eyes were opened to seeing people as different parts of the same Body.

In our world today, we have an obsession with the right answer. The church is not an exception to this reality. Our fixation on communicating certainty and convincing others to agree often leads to the creation of opposing “camps” or “parties.” Both sides think they’re right and the other side is crazy. This quote from Jack Haberer’s book *GodViews* speaks deeply to our experience as a small group, “The church is far too complex—and for most believers it is far too complicated—to continue to allow a simple, two-party theory to summarize the church’s divisions. Us-and-them, good-guys-and-bad-guys, liberals-and-conservatives…such categorizations provide a great way to run a war, but they comprise a godawful way to run a church” (8).
This is our personal invitation and challenge to you: build cohesion, not camps. Rather than seeing our small group time as a place for the camps to go at, it was a time where we were “resolutely determined to stay together, to struggle together, to study together, to serve together, and worship together” (Haberer xi). There is so much beauty in being together.

2. **Fostering an environment of grace-filled speech and conversation** - So it’s one thing to adopt the mindset of embracing theological diversity; it’s another to practically and faithfully do it. After plenty of failure in this area, our small group realized that if we were going to truly buy into the idea of embracing theological diversity, then we needed to change our conversation model. Rather than relying on debating or lecturing, we needed authentic dialogue. In her book, *Business and Professional Communication*, Sandra Goodall’s definition of dialogue is laced with Christ’s love and Paul’s vision for harmony: “Dialogue is communication that focuses on mutuality and relational growth rather than on self-interest. It is more concerned with discovering than with disclosing, more interested in access than in domination” (Goodall 109). Wow. Every small group should be aiming to model their conversation on that definition. In our journey, our words, tones, and non-verbals were not creating that type of dialogue. Rather, our antagonizing, attacking, and even condemning were hindering not only our ability to build one another up, but also any meaningful and effective communication with one another. Though we may have felt we were arguing well and passionately defending our convictions, those moments were likely at the expense of building cohesion and mutual respect because our conversations were void of grace-filled speech.

When your group is forming and shaping expectations, we highly recommend including something about gracefulness and respect when communicating. In conversation about that expectation, use it as an opportunity to lay out the concerns and challenges that come with having sensitive theological discussions. Ask the group if you have the freedom to keep them accountable with their speech, tone, and attitude during debates/arguments. Challenge them to keep an eye out for one another. It’ll be important for you as the leader then to deliberately and continually remind your group about sticking to grace-filled speech. We encourage you to take some time to reflect on our suggested tips below:
Practical tips for behavior and action:

- From the outset, verbally recognize and admit that you and another disagree about something, but that it’s okay. Indicate your desire to learn and grow from hearing their point of view.
- Be aware of your volume—are you properly mirroring the other person’s tone or are you easily influenced to raise your voice above your counterpart.
- What are your non-verbals communicating? Are you coming off as aggressive, judgmental, or haughty? Or are you displaying a welcoming, inviting, and gentle spirit?
- Rather than spitting back a defense or counterargument every time they make a point, ask good questions in response. This communicates that you are genuinely listening and desire to learn. Questions are also a win-win because it allows the other person to be challenged and think about why they believe what they believe.
- Highlight and emphasize any areas of commonality or close alignment.
- Admit when you are uncertain about or even wrong about something. No one has cornered the market on certainty when it comes to debatable theological points, so the sooner we admit our own uncertainty and the possibility of being wrong—the sooner dialogue will likely become graceful, respectful, and open-minded.
- Identify and affirm the other person’s valid arguments/perspectives, even when you don’t agree with them. If you think the other person(s) is completely and utterly incorrect, then still express your appreciation for their willingness to share their view. Find something to compliment and encourage them with.
- When it is your turn to talk, keep your statements focused on one specific point. Then let the other person(s) mull it over, and encourage them to respond. If you keep piling on supporting statements and information, then it comes across as overwhelming and domineering. When you have a chance to talk again, then you bring up an additional specific point. You can always come back to an additional point or reference to scripture, but less is more in a respectful/graceful dialogue (and it’s even a more effective persuasion tool 😊)
- The conversation doesn’t need to end with a winner! Express your appreciation for the discussion and tell them what you learned.
- Do your research and have a follow-up conversation. Read and explore the other side that you just heard. Ask them more questions and seek provide answers that your counterpart had raised in the original conversation.

“Our greatest theological debates are never more than a family squabble. That doesn’t demean the importance of the debate, but it does set a dramatically different tone for how we speak to each other and the options we consider for resolving the debates” (Haberer xi).
3. **Know your group and its purpose** - Every group will be on a different playing field when it comes to discussing theology. You may have members who come from private Christian high schools where they studied the Bible and apologetics at length already. You may have a number of ministry majors who are immersed in the academic study of the Christian faith at Messiah. Or you may have younger, inexperienced disciples of Christ who are just recently beginning to dig into the Scriptures and study the faith. It is all the more likely that you will have a wide variety of theological aptitude (which is probably the toughest scenario—but with the most potential!). It will be important to take inventory of your group’s theological demographics in order to determine how to proceed. You certainly don’t want to end up with a few of the members arguing while the rest of the group sits in confusion. You also don’t want to spend time re-hashing an issue at a depth level that the vast majority of the group considers elementary. Additionally, this information-gathering stage will be a good time to consider the various backgrounds that your members are coming from (we talk more about this below). Asking yourself, and even the group directly, some of these questions will bring hopefully bring some clarity and direction:

- How important is theological conversation to us? Is it related to our goals? Vision?
- What is our level of theological awareness?
- How many of us are theologically savvy?
- How strong of a desire does our group have to grow in theological adeptness?

On a secondary note, awareness of your group and its purpose should be evaluated on a meeting by meeting basis when it comes to navigating theological conversations. Each gathering time differs based on the lesson, passage, conversation flow, timing, or topic at hand. As a result, it will take a keen discernment of the Spirit’s leading to most beneficially navigate theological discussion on case by case basis. For example, there are plenty of times when a discussion on the authority of scripture is perfectly appropriate, but it may not be what is most fruitful for the group if it is going to interrupt a healthy discussion on serving the “least of these” or extend the lesson time so substantially that prayer requests are cut out. It all depends on the nature and purpose of the group at that meeting. Certainly this is no easy task (it may be one of the toughest parts of being a small group leader!), and it takes quite a bit of experience to develop even a moderate comfort level with making these decisions. Here are some helpful questions to ask yourself (on the spot!) when an opportunity to engage in theological conversation emerges during a group meeting:

- How fruitful/meaningful is this “bunny trail” in light of our goal for this meeting?
- How fruitful/meaningful could this conversation be considering our group’s current dynamic?
- How helpful/interesting will this conversation be to group as a whole?
- Why is the individual bringing this topic up? Do they have the group’s best interest in mind or their own?
- Could this conversation bring new energy and focus to the gathering? Or would it be a deterrent from the momentum we have built so far in our current topic?
- Is this discussion relevant and substantial enough for the time it could take?
- How related is this conversation? Could it be tied into the topic at hand in any way? Or should it be saved for outside of our meeting time or a later date?
4. **Humility trumps expertise** - Have you ever been in a conversation where the other person seems to “know it all” shoving their viewpoint and credentials down your throat with facts, supporting statements, and counter arguments that seemingly undermine everything you say? Not fun. I’m sure we’ve all been there, and we’ve also surely been the culprit at some point. But think back to that conversation… Were you really listening to that person when they were spewing their argument at you? Did you really come away convinced that they were right? Did you feel positive about that interaction? It’s likely that your answer was *no* to each of these questions despite the fact that they may have been an “expert” or at least a knowledgeable source on the topic. Why?

For those who are well-versed, studied, or experienced in a certain area (this applies to much more than theology!), there is often a tension of humility and training. The more one receives training, education, or knowledge in a certain discipline, the more likely they see themselves as an expert or authority in a context where that topic is being discussed. But if we’re not careful, then training can prohibit us from having a willingness to listen and blind us to another’s thoughts and perspective. At this point we’re totally locked-in to our view, so we come across as defensive, arrogant, and even disparaging during the discussion. It is rare to have healthy, productive, and respectful dialogue under those circumstances.

In the midst of a theological discussion where tension and emotions are sensitive, it is vital to maintain a posture of seeking to understand before being understood. Not only does this help us seek unity in diversity and foster a graceful environment, but it also allows the Spirit to guide us with an attitude of humility. Actually listening to and seeking to understand the other person is one of the most selfless things you can do in a potentially heated theological discussion. Another safeguard against becoming an annoying ‘know it all’ is to establish relationship with the opposing individual. Imagine that the conversation you had above was with one of your best friends. We would hope that there would be more respect, openness, dialogue, and listening simply because of your mutual friendship. The best theological conversations across differences are born from strong relationship. It’s hard to pinpoint exactly why, but it’s generally very true isn’t it? Maybe it’s because you know their story and the conviction behind their perspective. Maybe it’s because you see them as a person made in the image of God with hopes, dreams, feelings, emotions, and desires too. Maybe you’re just unwilling to damage the relationship for the sake of winning the argument.

Even Paul, who doesn’t shy away in his letters from expressing his conviction about the importance of proper teaching and doctrine, acknowledges that expertise takes a back seat to love in the Body of Christ, “Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes” (1 Corinthians 8:1). If our most important practice as members of the Body is to love one another, then our aim in theological discourse is not to ‘win at all costs.’ It is to love at all costs, even if it means we ‘lose’ the argument.
5. **Be resourceful, empowering** - As small group leaders, you don’t have all the answers. Nobody does. In fact, some of your group members may have more theological knowledge than you. And that is perfectly okay! Part of your role as a small group leader is to **empower** others for learning and teaching of the faith. It is unhealthy for both you and your members to solely be learning from you about Christianity because you only represent one perspective and (no offense) you’re probably wrong about some things. Rather than putting so much pressure on yourself and thinking you have to be an answer machine for all the questions your group has, consider yourself as a **resource**. Certainly you should have the freedom and willingness to share your thoughts and opinions, but then also utilize the vast amount of resources (books, blogs, commentaries, theology readers, people etc.) our world has to offer! Direct them to credible sources on both sides of the issue. Send them that Facebook post or magazine article you saw the other day or bookmarked years ago about the topic. Give them a pertinent book to read if they’re really wrestling with an issue. Connect them with a professor, faculty member, local pastor, or even student who has more expertise with a certain topic. Ultimately we want to encourage our group members to explore, discover, and think critically for themselves about scripture, tradition, and personal experience when it comes to faithful theological reflection and interpretation.

**P.S.** It is perfectly okay to say, *I don’t know.* We could use more of those people today.

**Overview of traditions/movements of the Church**

To get us started on a journey of embracing theological diversity and creating a healthy awareness of the broad spectrum, we advise doing a brief synopsis of the major church traditions and movements over the course of its history. The following overviews and explanations are found in “The Five Movements in the History of the Church” of *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* by James Bryan Smith. We’ve adapted it slightly to include the liturgical movement and other denominations. Keep in mind that these are cursory descriptions and introductions--not comprehensive accounts or listings. It is intended to get the conversation and learning process underway.

**The Contemplative Movement** – In the fourth century men and women fled the life of the city to found cloisters and monasteries, emphasizing the importance of solitude, meditation, and prayer, a notable example being St. Augustine of Hippo. The church was strengthened by this renewal of intimacy with God.

Distinguishing emphasis: Devotion to God

Notable denominations associated with the movement: Quaker, Emerging Church
The Holiness Movement – In the early eighteenth century, John Wesley and his friends from Oxford who were nicknamed the “Holy Club” began focusing on moral laxity and the need for the removal of sinful habits in the life of the Christian. Because of the work of the Methodist movement, the church once again took sin seriously, and the effect of the movement was dramatic.

Distinguishing emphasis: Virtue in all of life

Notable denominations associated with the movement: Brethren in Christ, United Methodist Church, Church of God, The Church of the Nazarene, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Salvation Army

The Charismatic Movement – In the seventeenth century the church witnessed a new outbreak of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women who were called “Quakers,” led by the ministry of George Fox. The active role of the Spirit was at the center of their worship, and it propelled them into evangelism, missions, and social concern. Charismatics hold that the manifestations of the Holy Spirit given to those in the first-century church may still be experienced and practiced today. Today, the modern Charismatic movement is most known for its acceptance of speaking in tongues, divine healing, and prophecies as evidence of the Holy Spirit. Most gatherings include praying and spirited singing, dancing, shouting “in the spirit,” and raising hands and arms in prayer.

Distinguishing emphasis: Spirit empowered

Notable denominations associated with the movement: Assemblies of God, Apostolic Church, Church of God in Christ, Non-denominational, Association of Vineyard Churches

The Social Justice Movement – In the late twelfth century a man named Francis of Assisi and a group of followers abandoned their former lives and went about the countryside of Italy caring for the sick, the poor, and the lame. Countless men and women followed Francis’s lead, and the Church’s impact on disease and poverty was remarkable.

Distinguishing emphasis: Compassion for others

Notable denominations associated with the movement: United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, Unitarian Universalist
The Evangelical Movement – In the fifteenth century, the Church witnessed a renaissance in recognizing the importance of the Bible and preaching. Martin Luther and others provided believers with a hitherto unavailable access to the Bible. A later consequence of this was a new awareness of the role of the laity. The Protestant emphasis upon personal witness and evangelism naturally followed this newfound access to the Scriptures.

Distinguishing emphasis: Scriptural and evangelistic outreach

Notable denominations associated with the movement: The Southern Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, National Baptist Church, Nondenominational, Pentecostal denominations, Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbyterian Church in America, and Evangelical Free Church of America

The Liturgical Movement – Though the roots of this tradition go back to 3rd century, the movement as we know it began as a 19th-century scholarship for the reform of worship within the Roman Catholic Church. It has developed over the last century and a half and has affected many other Christian Churches, including the Church of England and other churches of the Anglican Communion, and some Protestant churches. There are many facets to this movement including the broadened examination of the nature of worship as an organic human activity its attempt to bring about reconciliation among the churches on both sides of the Protestant Reformation.

Distinguishing emphasis: Liturgy, participation of the laity, ecumenism

Notable denominations associated with the movement: Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Episcopal Church

Assessment: Inventory and Evaluation of Traditions

Now that we have overviewed the major movements and traditions of the Christian faith, let’s take a practical step toward applying this to your group. At Messiah College, you are privileged with the opportunity to study and live with students from an extremely wide variety of Christian faith traditions. Consequently, it is inevitable that your group will be far from homogenous in theological/denominational makeup. In our principles, we learned that to avoid knowing and recognizing this reality would be both harmful to our theological education and a missed opportunity for deeper community within your small group. So what does faithfully embracing this diversity look like within a small group?

With the help of College Pastor Don Opitz, we’ve constructed a simple assessment that a small group can complete together. There is both a personal and communal component to the assessment. We recommend writing out your personal reflections as well as having some form of a communal compilation list for the inventory section.
**Inventory:** The first component, inventory, is the information gathering piece. Each small group member should identify and share with the group their historical background as it relates to Christian denominations and traditions. It’ll be useful for the group leader to take notes during this time because the result will be a complete makeup of the group’s theological demographics that group members may want to remember and/or reference later.

1. What denominations have you regularly attended for worship?
2. What Christian faith traditions have shaped you? Positive or Negative.
   - Explain how the listed tradition shaped you (was it an institution, congregation, book, mentor, friend, conversation, etc.?)
   - Explain the extent to which each tradition listed has had its influence

We recommend dedicating some reflection time in silence (or to assign this as “homework”) for everyone to answer these questions personally, and then a solid amount of time for each person to share with the group.

**Evaluation:** The second component, evaluation, is the reflective, introspective, and self-analysis piece. Each member should carefully and thoroughly process the following questions as self-examination of views, opinions, biases, and fears in regards to Christian traditions. Members must be committed to challenging themselves during this portion.

1. How do I view Christian traditions that are not my own?
2. How do I view denominations that I have not been a part of in a worship context?
3. What are some positive things about the other traditions represented in my group?
4. What apprehensions do I have about other traditions and denominations?
   - Be specific about the certain tradition or denomination even if it is one that another group member identifies with.
5. What biases do I have towards my tradition or denomination? What biases do I have towards other traditions or denominations?

For this final portion, we recommend each member share what they have learned about themselves as well as their reactions to other members’ stories. Give everyone a chance to also share things they are still struggling to understand, need to process more, or find noteworthy about the group.

When should your group consider doing this assessment? That’s a difficult question. Maybe you’ve guessed our answer by now—every group is different. There may be some groups where members have some experience with theological study of the Christian church. These groups may could be ready and willing to do this assessment at some point during the first semester. Most groups will probably want to wait until the second semester, by which point those first-year students have probably grasped some knowledge of the Universal church and different traditions. Additionally, the second semester tends to be the season for a small group where difficult conversations and healthy conflict over differences are more approachable. A very small percentage of groups, where the make-up is junior and senior students (maybe with a number of theologically savvy members too), should be able to and would benefit from doing this inventory within the first month of meeting.
What if your group members have little conceptual or practical understanding of Christian traditions? With Western Christianity’s explosion of non-denominational congregations, many young believers are not as conscious of different Christian traditions or just completely unaware of this reality. In response to your proposal to do this assessment some may ask, What do you mean different traditions?? I’m a Christian. That’s my religious background. Aren’t we all the same? Maybe that’s oversimplifying it, but this thinking may particularly be the case for first-year students. These individuals may benefit from the overview of traditions (above), a little history lesson on Christianity, or a breakdown of the current denominational makeup of Christianity in the U.S. We do hope though that this assessment has been structured in such a way that it is accessible to these individuals, and could teach them a little about how they’ve been shaped and formed as a believer. If they’re open to it, then it will be a very fruitful endeavor. However, there could still be group members who are very resistant to this idea of diversity within Christian traditions. At this point, there is not much you can do. You could direct them to another resource or share your own reflection of your Christian background and make-up. You may also give them the option to not participate in the group’s assessment.

Scenarios: Practical case studies with tips

Below are five common scenarios related to theological differences that occur in nearly every small group. We hope that these case studies, along with our suggestions and tips, will give you a chance to mentally and practically prepare for navigating some realistic situations that theological differences present. You’ll hopefully notice our application of the principles (above) in our proposed methods of navigation! Disclaimer: While we do encourage you to take full advantage of preparing for these scenarios in advance, every small group leader will still have to learn to think quickly on their feet. These situations will manifest themselves in different ways depending on group makeup, and therefore the solutions may also need adaptation. This should be a good starting point however!

A. Balancing the Theologians and the Novices

A circumstance that you are likely to encounter in a small group, especially if the members are randomly assigned, is the disparity of theological savviness and knowledge. You will likely have a few people who are very engaged theologically, a few people who have been exposed to very little theological conversation, and few in the middle. Let’s take for example, views on the Eucharist, or communion, or The Lord’s Supper. People in your group may have very strong opinions on transubstantiation, or the ability of the bread and wine to turn into Christ’s actual body and blood during communion. They may be adamant about sharing their opinions about their church’s tradition and view on the theological divide. Other people in your group may be thinking transub-what? and may not see what the big deal is. It’s bound to happen, so how do you work through a theological debate during which some people are very engaged, but others are not?
Navigation:

Don’t panic. There are a number of possible ways to navigate this scenario and ensure that all are feeling included in group discussion. If there are a significant amount of the people in your group who are concerned with discussing theological topics that the general Christian population knows little about, then consider providing a little background information (or allowing those individuals to educate the group). After providing a basic explanation to the whole group, then you can decide to discuss it further. If you decide to continue delving deeper into the topic, then at least everyone has a general idea of what is happening. Another option is to politely transition into another topic or back to the lesson. This would be wise if you see and sense that some people are still feeling totally lost or disinterested. At that point you’ll want to encourage the enthusiastic “theologians” to discuss the topic at another time. A third option would be to intentionally foster that conversation outside of the whole group meeting time. You could talk to the “theologians” individually (or with however many are interested in the conversation) or ask them about planning a group meeting to specifically talk theology. An issue you may run into is having one person in your group who is determined to have a theological discussion every week, even though the rest of the group is not nearly as passionate about that area of Christian faith. It’s vital to have an individual conversation with this person to revisit the group’s vision and purpose while coming to an agreement on how to proceed with the entire group’s best interest at mind.

B. Stubborn disagreement: We will argue until someone WINS

Ever been stuck in the middle of two passionate debaters? Now imagine a bunch of your group members looking to you for help as Freddie and Carl have a shouting match. You may have people in your group who avidly disagree about a certain topic, and the argument seems to have no end in sight. What do you do when they argue back and forth with each counterpoint bringing more awkwardness and disarray to your group? How do you address those relentlessly stubborn attitudes? What if you’re one of the passionate debaters?

Navigation:

Your primary aim should be to diffuse some of the tension and transition into another topic. If the people arguing refuse to stop, then recommend that they meet outside of the small group setting to continue discussing. As small group leaders, we don’t want to assume the heated conversation will reach a fruitful conclusion shortly. However, we also don’t want to skirt deep theological issues. To gently address the conflict and hopefully diffuse the tension, you can make process comments. An example would be I can see things are getting heated, why don’t we take a step back and talk about this again later? or I realize that we all don’t agree, but we don’t need to yell at each other. Let’s practice healthy, graceful conversation habits and remember to seek to understand those who disagree with us. Stating what is happening in your group will allow everyone to be aware and hopefully use this as a learning experience. Which leads us to

“When conflict arises, stay calm and listen - you’ll set a great example for your group members as you help facilitate respectful discussion.”

– Jonathan Fuller 2016’
our next point: see this as an opportunity. Point out to your group members that they will engage
with other Christians who completely disagree with them about something theologically, but that
doesn’t mean healthy conversation isn’t possible. You can also use this experience to touch
briefly on some of the principles we talked about above. Lastly, we want to note that some group
members will be a lot more comfortable with conflict than others. What may not seem like a
huge argument to you may seem like a really big deal to someone else in your group. Make sure
you are aware of the people in your group and their feelings during discussions. Don’t forget that
leaders too end up in these debates. Even if you think that could never happen to you as a leader,
don’t assume too much. It happens to the best of them. A helpful safeguard for when this does
occur is to have a co-leader, friend, or responsible member of your group who is willing to
gently make a process comment in your direction. Something as simple as—Hey Emily, do you
think you and Megan could save this for another time? Things are getting a little intense and it
might be best to move on--should help you snap out of it. Be intentional about identifying these
trustworthy individuals and asking them accountability early on before something like this
happens.

C. “I don’t know”

There are two situations when this phrase might present itself. One is fairly avoidable and the
second has an effective solution. 1. You raise a question that no one in your group has ever
considered. Maybe everyone in your group looks at you with blank stares after you ask them for
their view on how to interpret scripture or evaluate eschatology? 2. One of your group members
asks you a question that you either don’t have the knowledge to answer or haven’t come to a
strong enough conclusion to favor a viewpoint. In either scenario, what should you say? Can you
really say that seemingly taboo phrase for a leader--I don’t know?

Navigation:

Some people are not ready to discuss challenging theological subjects before being educated in
that area. It’s important to be tuned in to what your small group is ready for before throwing out
questions with significant weight. A general rule of thumb is if you don’t really know your group
well, then hold off on the theological bombshells. With regard to the second situation, we
encourage you to apply principle #5 above (Be resourceful, empowering). Remember, you
don’t need to have all the answers. You are a resource and one who empowers group members
for learning, particularly in the arena of theology. Consequently, if you are confronted with a
question that you haven’t solidly determined your stance on or don’t understand, saying those
three word –I don’t know--is not a sin. It is certainly better than making up an answer or
inaccurately representing an interpretation. This doesn’t mean you are unfit to be a leader; you
are being honest and vulnerable. A helpful tip for this situation that directly empowers others--
ask the rest of the group for input. Maybe someone else in the group does have a well-informed
opinion or understanding of the question. Additionally, you can commit to researching outside of
the group meeting and send some resources or thoughts to the questioning group member. Don’t
be afraid to say those three words! It may be exactly what your group needs.
D. We don’t agree, so let’s not talk about it

Someone opens the can of worms and mentions a controversial topic that is likely to spark debate--and the group knows it (either because of well documented differences in theology or differing traditional backgrounds between group members). Maybe it’s a divisive subject that has come up before in the group setting and created some tension. Maybe it’s homosexuality, hell, authority of scripture, or predestination. Regardless, it is clear that a significant amount of your group is uncomfortable or afraid to talk because agreement is unlikely and the overt tension doesn’t seem to be worth it. What do you do with that ambivalent attitude?

Navigation:

We understand that this one is especially tricky. On the one hand, you don’t want to fuel the fire of unhealthy or unproductive arguing, but you also want to be able to talk about the difficult issues with your small group even when there is strong disagreement. We want small groups to be places where theological diversity and graceful conversations (principles #1 and 2) are possible, so how do you encourage that environment here? Our advice is to be tactful. If you know something will create turbulence in your group, then think twice before bringing it up. However, if it will add value to your discussion or the lesson at hand, then don’t be afraid to bring up those tricky questions. But as you invite your group to engage in the uncomfortable conversation, make the most of the silence. This is a platform to remind your group of the beauty in theological diversity. Challenge them to envision the small group as a place that is first seeking harmony and unity in Christ; therefore despite differing views, it can be an arena where people freely diverge for the purpose of mutual learning and growth. Encourage them handle the topic with respectfulness, gracefulness, and selflessness. Here’s another practical tip: If it’s a topic that has previously been discussed, simply see if anyone wants to share any changes in their viewpoint (if there are any) or additional information/resources they have discovered. This should model non-abrasive dialogue and hopefully create an atmosphere where others feel more comfortable entering into the conversation.

E. Getting off track/distracting conversation

Your lesson plan or bible study is rolling right along with great conversation and group insight--until someone interjects with a comment that significantly detracts from the direction of the study and discussion. (for example, the lesson is on the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus’s display of humility/compassion, but someone brings up the debate of whether miraculous healings or events like this are possible today through the Spirit.) No one wants to be rude or ignore the question or comment, but maybe there are a couple of individuals in the group who are more intrigued by this potential route than the current topic. Should you entertain the question and allow for the rabbit trail or should you stick to what you prepared to ensure you cover everything?
Navigation:

As mentioned before, small group leadership often boils down to two things: 1. Trial and error. 2. Discernment of the Spirit’s leading. This is absolutely one of those scenarios where both apply. You can’t know for certain what a rabbit trail might produce. There is no black and white answer to dealing with this scenario. When we consider our principles though, we know we don’t want to be afraid of theological conversations. We want to challenge our group members to be theologians. However, we also know that small group leadership necessitates putting the entire group in the best place to grow. For that reason, we strongly oppose letting an off-topic conversation go long at all when it is considerably divorced from the subject at hand (particularly when the group conversation has been good up until this point). In fact, the default response to something like this should be (this is simply our opinion) to curtail off-track and distracting conversations in favor of staying the course of the current topic. The development and progression of a study is vital for learning and deep conversation. However, when group conversation is sputtering for whatever reason, the right theological tangent or rabbit trail conversation is an appropriate exception to the default since it may bring new life and meaning to that group time. We wish you our blessings as you seek to think quickly on your feet and discern the best direction for your group when this scenario arises!

Classical Hot Topics
How to handle these common theological disagreements

Some may dread it, others may cherish it; however, we all know that it will happen. Small groups are fertile ground for discussing “hot topics” in Christian theology. Because this is the reality, we compiled a resource that would tangible help you prepare for and navigate through specific theological disagreements.

For each hot topic, we’ve equipped you with possible conversational triggers, an introductory synopsis of both sides along with scriptural support, and a plethora of resources to explore. It is important to note that in listing the opposed sides of each issue this overview does not include every supporting argument or point, nor does it include all of the nuanced views within each category. This is intended to be a general and convenient overview so that small group leaders have a strong foundation of understanding and awareness in regards to these topics. We also hope this will help launch you and your group into healthy study and discussion. Though there are an incredible number of divisive theological issues, we selected three topics we believed to be the most critical and relevant to the Messiah College community at this time.

The majority of information used for compiling the sides of each topic was gathered from *Across the Spectrum* by Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy.
• **Authority of Scripture**

It might come up when you’re talking about... the Bible (well duh), the apparent discrepancies in scripture, theology class (or the ‘weird’ things someone has been hearing from their friend who is taking theology), how to interpret Genesis 1, creation vs. evolution, etc. Since interpreting 2 Timothy 3:16 is at the heart of this discussion, reading that passage will likely trigger a discussion on this topic as well.

The sides:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Inerrancy</strong></th>
<th><strong>Infallibility</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The Bible is without error in all matters it addresses, including faith, practice, history, and science.</td>
<td>• The Bible can and should be trusted as unfailing in all matters that pertain to Christian faith and living. It cannot be considered inerrant in regard to minor matters of history and science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Bible is without any real errors, not without any apparent errors. It only applies to the original manuscripts and there are things about the Bible that our finite minds cannot explain.</td>
<td>• The Bible is thoroughly inspired, but also thoroughly human. The human element reflects the limitations and fallibility that are a part of all human perspectives and thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inerrancy applies to the authors’ original intent, not necessarily to our interpretation of a passage. Error does not occur in use of language that is not literally true when it was not intended to convey literal truth.</td>
<td>• Divine inspiration requires only that the Bible is unfailing in all that God intends to use it for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Bible teaches that it is without error.</td>
<td>• The focus of inspiration is exclusively on faith and practice. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author was concerned with whether the Bible represents history or science in a way that is “inerrant” by modern standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Since God cannot lie or deceive, God’s promise about the Bible being without error must come to pass.</td>
<td>• Had God attempted to communicate a historically or scientifically accurate view of the world in every little detail, then the theological truth would not have been communicated effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Jesus’s trust, affirmation, and use of Scripture highlights his belief that scripture cannot be void.</td>
<td>• We customarily accept a source to the extent that we have reasons for accepting it, and we reject it to the extent that we have reasons for rejecting it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Christian tradition over the course of history has widely affirmed and assumed that the Bible is without error.</td>
<td>• Scripture support: Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 46:8-10, John 10:35, 2 Timothy 3:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Since God is perfect, what He breathes must retain perfection; therefore, the Bible cannot err.</td>
<td>• Scriptural support: 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resources to explore: Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority, and Interpretation by David Dockery, The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority by G.K. Beale, The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture by N.T. Wright, Surprised by Scripture by N.T. Wright, The Bible Tells Me So by Peter Enns, A Passion for Truth by Alister McGrath, Opening the Bible by Thomas Merton, The Scripture Principle by Clark Pinnock

- **Arminianism vs. Calvinism**

It might come up when you’re talking about…the future, God’s sovereignty, God’s plan, the problem of evil, or salvation. The following conversation is something you shouldn’t be surprised to overhear at Messiah—Let’s have a theological discussion, says Jethro. O, I know, free will versus pre-destination! Darius responds. It seems to be the go-to, de-facto, theological debate on a Christian college campus.

**The sides:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arminianism</th>
<th>Calvinism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• God sovereignly chooses to not meticulously control everything,</td>
<td>• God is the omnipotent Creator of all things; therefore, he is the sovereign Lord over all events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• God gives people the ability and the obligation to make morally responsible choices.</td>
<td>• God controls everything, including who will and will not be saved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• God foreknows who will and will not believe, but he does not control who will and will not believe.</td>
<td>• The absolute sovereignty of God is implied in the very concept of God. If anything can thwart God’s will, then that thing is more powerful than God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• God is often disappointed and frustrated by their choices.</td>
<td>• People are responsible for their decisions, yet how people choose is in accordance with the eternal plan of the sovereign God who controls all things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If God wants people to genuinely love him—not just act lovingly toward him—he must create people who have the capacity to reject him. They must determine whether they love him.</td>
<td>• God orchestrates attitudes and behaviors that actually conflict with his moral will but that do so for the greater good of displaying his glory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• God is able to wisely bring good out of evil that free agents create.</td>
<td>• God’s sovereign will encompasses evil. Evil events take place for a higher good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• God can foreknow the decisions of people without determining them.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>


- **Women in Ministry: Complementarian vs. Egalitarian**

It might come up when you’re talking about…dating relationships, marriage, spiritual leadership in a relationship, calling, vocation, or gifts. If someone has just heard a female pastor speak for the first time or a member mentions a female pastor, then some questions and viewpoints might start flying. Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, 1 Timothy 2, or 1 Peter 3 will also spark this debate.

The sides:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egalitarian</th>
<th>Complementarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church leadership and roles in the home are determined by gifting rather than by gender.</td>
<td>While men and women are equal in terms of their worth and dignity, they are gifted and called by God to carry out different roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The subservient role of women to men, especially in regard to spiritual leadership, is another aspect of fallen culture that God wants to overthrow.</td>
<td>Scripture teaches that God’s design is for men to have spiritual authority and leadership in all areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The word for “helper” or “partner” used in Genesis 2 translates to the Hebrew phrase <em>Ezer Kenegdo</em>, which means in English – “A power like him facing him as equal.”</td>
<td>God’s mandate to Adam to take care of the Garden and prophecy that he shall “rule” over Eve highlights the functional differentiation between man and woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While there are passages that teach women are to submit to men or refrain from spiritual authority, these passages do not express God’s will for all time.</td>
<td>Jesus chose twelve men to be the foundational spiritual leaders of the new community of God’s people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the complementarian design was God’s intention, then the Bible would not contain counterexamples.</td>
<td>In Paul’s letters, the way female submission is expressed is cultural, but the fact that it is expressed is not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no rationally discernable connection (or valid argument based on reason and experience) between a person’s gender and his or her natural ability to preach, reach, or lead others.</td>
<td>Paul’s references to God’s creational design imply that instructions about women’s submission were intended for all believers, in all cultures, and in all times.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Scriptural support: Genesis 2:18-24, Genesis 3:16, 1 Timothy 3:2-12, 1 Timothy 2:11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, 1 Corinthians 14:34, Ephesians 5:22-24, 1 Peter 3:1-6
Conclusion

We can tell you that the beauty of theological differences in small groups is worth it. It’s worth the challenge, the awkward silence, the tension, and the occasional conflict. It’s a journey learning how to navigate these waters, but when you do, you’ll have that much clearer sight of the Lighthouse. We leave you with a profound quote from one of our Koinonia small group leaders about her thoughts on this subject:

“Groups will have a variety of theological opinions because they have a variety of people with a variety of experiences. This is a strength, not a weakness. Only through listening to our brothers and sisters can we add to our wisdom that which we’ve never experienced.”

– Sallie McCann 2016’
Sources and Additional Resources


Communication

Just because you are talking, does not mean that you are communicating! Here are some practical ideas on how to communicate better as a leader, and to improve group communication as a whole.

Asking Questions

One of your biggest responsibilities as a small group leader is to ask questions. Questions are tricky and there are a ton of different kinds. Here are a few different types of questions, examples, and when you can use them. The information below comes from The Ultimate Road Trip (1995). Try varying the types of questions you ask in order to promote the best discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question:</th>
<th>Use:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Launching</strong>&lt;br&gt;an open question that helps to start discussion</td>
<td>Sets the tone of the discussion and draws group members in</td>
<td>“What are some ways in which you have been negatively impacted by the actions of others?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guiding or Clarifying</strong>&lt;br&gt;helps to explain or compare and contrast</td>
<td>Brings a group back to a topic after a tangent or makes group members think about a specific topic</td>
<td>“What is Jesus saying when he uses this parable as an illustration?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Follow-Up</strong>&lt;br&gt;questions that draw the group into discussion after a member has expressed an opinion or answered a question</td>
<td>Gets the whole group involved in the discussion. Prevents one person from answering all of the questions</td>
<td>“Good thought, what do the rest of you think?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summarizing</strong>&lt;br&gt;repeating what a verse or passage says to increase clarification</td>
<td>Helps synthesize what has been discussed and gives incite for understanding</td>
<td>“How would you summarize what Jesus is saying in this verse?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Applying</strong>&lt;br&gt;help group members to apply principles learned from a passage</td>
<td>Helps to process the verse or passage in the context of a person’s own life</td>
<td>“What are ways that we can be more conscious of our words this week?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reverse</strong>&lt;br&gt;reverts a question back to the person who asked it</td>
<td>Encourages members to think about their own questions rather than just expecting other people to answer them</td>
<td>“That’s a great question, Steve. What do you think?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relay</strong>&lt;br&gt;takes a question asked to the leader and relaying it to another member of the group.</td>
<td>Allows for the whole group to work through a question rather than just relying on the leader. This can also get specific group members involved</td>
<td>“That’s an interesting question, Hannah. What do you think, Megan?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Open vs. Closed vs. Limiting questions

When you ask questions, it is also possible to ask *open*, *closed*, or *limiting* questions. Open questions should be used most of the time, limiting questions some of the time, and closed questions should never be used. Open questions encourage group members to share, promote discussion and have no right or wrong answers. An example of this would be “What commands stand out to you in this passage?” A limiting question is not very helpful for group discussion, but they can be useful if you are summarizing a point of getting the group back on track. An example of this would include “What are the three main ideas in this passage?” Closed questions are not valuable for discussion and the answer is often times implied by the asker. They limit group interaction. An example would be “Paul commands us to rejoice in everything, doesn’t he?” This is the type of question you don’t want to ask. It makes you seem like you have all the right answers and does not promote people to talk. Be aware of the type of questions you are asking and always strive for those open questions!

Improving overall group communication

In your small group it may be a struggle to initiate conversation. Here is a list of the top 10 discussion problems that you may encounter and how to solve them in your small group. These cover most of the communication problems you will faces and a few ideas on how to get over them.

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| 1. Dead silence | **DO:** If the question was good, relax, people probably just need some time to think it over before they answer. If the question wasn’t good, rephrase, or ask another back-up question.  
**DON’T:** Fill the silence by talking. People don’t need to hear you preach. You can contribute, but don’t feel the need to fill the silence with your own ideas. |
| 2. A wrong answer | **DO:** be gracious and gentle, don’t get flustered. Redirect the question to another individual, or ask everyone to look back at the passage to guide them.  
**DON’T** just skip over if it is a huge error. Just remember to be kind and understanding in your phrasing. |
| 3. Tons of distractions | **DO:** try to limit distractions – have people turn off their phones and avoid interruptions. If the group constantly has a scheduling conflict or everyone wants to leave early to watch a TV show, consider changing the meeting time.  
**DON’T** Lose your patience. If you get upset or angry, it will only increase those feelings in everyone else and make it worse. |
| 4. Difficult question | **DO:** If someone asks you a question that you don’t know the answer to, be honest and tell them you’ll look into it. Or ask them to research the answer and bring it back to the group next week.  
**DON’T** Make up an answer. There can be a lot of pressure for you to have it all figured out, but don’t act like you know something if you don’t. |
| 5. You can’t finish the lesson | Do: If the main problem is that everyone is talking, try to set some guidelines so that they know the central purpose of your meeting is not just to chat. If the main problem is that people are spending too much time on each question, try allotting specific time for each question so you don’t get bogged down in the beginning and not finish.  
DON’T: cut short a conversation that would be profitable to have. Be flexible if one week you don’t finish your lesson because your group had an important discussion. And don’t extend your meeting time passed what you all agreed on. People have other commitments too, and keeping them for an extra half-hour can cause tension. |
| 6. The non-stop talker | DO: Direct your questions to other members in the group. Sit next to the talkative person and minimize eye-contact to discourage excessive talking. If necessary, meet with them outside of the group meeting and ask him to keep his answers to a minimum.  
DON’T: address him in front of the rest of the group and ask him to stop talking so much. Also, don’t let him continue to talk. The other people in your group have opinions too! |
| 7. The silent member | DO: ask low-risk questions directly towards the member. They can answer them easily without putting a lot of pressure on them. Give them positive feedback and encourage them to continue to volunteer answers.  
DON’T: ask them hard questions that they might not know the answer to. Calling them out in front of everyone else can cause them to retreat further in their silence. |
| 8. Going off on tangents | DO: If you have people going off on tangents, it is important to redirect them. You can ask a question to put them back on track. Turn it into a joke “Well speaking of tacos, Christ’s love…”  
DON’T: get upset if sometimes your group chats for a little while. These are the times where friendships develop. Try not to feel the need to be on task ALL the time. |
| 9. Disagreements and conflicts | DO: take some time to talk about both sides of the argument. Sometimes you just have to move on. If two group members tend to bicker all the time, try talking to them outside of the group setting because this problem may not just go away.  
DON’T: let disagreements upset you. They often aid in the learning process. |
| 10. Leader answering all the questions | DO: rather than answering the questions, try helping people discover the answer themselves by trying some of the questioning techniques listen above. Be flexible with your expectations. People may go in a different direction then you had planned. Go with it and allow your group members freedom to express their opinions.  
DON’T: feel the need to fill empty silence. Often times group members will answer questions after they are given some time to think. Don’t be afraid of awkward silences. |
Dynamic communication

When you are communicating as a small group, it should not just be you asking one question, someone responding, and then moving on. You want a dynamic interaction between you and everyone else in the group. Look at the two pictures below with arrows representing the flow of communication. The first is a picture of an unhealthy group. The leader does most of the talking and individual people answer him. In the second image, the people are having a dynamic interaction where they all talk to each other and the leader. This is what fosters deep discussions and good communication. Encourage the second kind of group whenever possible. You want people to be having discussions. Avoid cutting them short and make sure that you have enough time for everyone to add what they think to the conversation. If you are a beginning leader, don’t feel discouraged if this takes a little time. Often new groups will take on the dynamic shown in the first diagram because everyone is new and few people know each other. With time and encouragement, your group can move on to the second dynamic easily.

“Ask for feedback from your group! Since these people will become your friends, it is sometimes hard for them to tell you that the planned lessons are boring or confusing, etc.”

- Larissa Miller 2018
Awareness of disabilities

It is possible that people in your small group may have a disability and it is important to be aware of this because many disabilities are invisible. It could be almost impossible for you to look at someone and tell that they have a reading disability. We say this because we often assume that everyone is comfortable with doing the same activities as us, but that can be very far from the truth. If someone has a reading disability, it could be torturous for them to be forced to read in a circle. It can lead to a lot of anxiety and may even be enough for them to want to leave the group. We know this to be true, yet people continuously want to read in a circle when they are in a small group. This is a bad idea because while it puts pressure on those who have a disability, it also puts pressure on those who don’t. Some people just aren’t comfortable reading out loud. Let people volunteer to read. Always.

Going along with that, a person in your group may have a physical or visual impairment. Think about activities that you plan and how that could impact your group member. Be aware and if someone comes to you and asks you to adapt your group because of a need they have, listen to them. It is important to make everyone feel included.
Additional Resources


- This book is a great resource no matter where you are in your small group. It can help with icebreakers, or new ways to pray. Obviously, not all 101 of these ideas are included in this guide, so check them out for yourself. Pay special attention to the fellowship section which includes some really interesting ways to get your group talking.


- This book is more academic in nature, however, it has very interesting information about developing group climate. This book may be hard to use for quick reference, but if you are having problems with communication in your group, it is a good place to go for information.
Relationship Building

It is perhaps the most essential ingredient to a small group. When relationships are flourishing with growing levels of closeness, a small group will bear much fruit and build up the body of Christ. Without strong, thriving friendships, a small group will likely dissolve or fail to reach its potential as a place of koinonia. Consequently, building relationships is also possibly the most intimidating component of small group ministry. Maybe you’re the leader of a group that has some members who are older than you. Maybe you’ve been assigned to lead a group of strangers you’ve never met before. Maybe this is your first time leading a small group and you’re not the most gifted person relationally. Or maybe you’re starting a small group with friends on your floor that you’ve shared laughter with over Lottie meals or fun, Snap Chat-able (that is now a word) moments with at soccer games, but you’ve never talked about your family, deepest dreams, fears of the future, or the ups and downs of your relationship with God. You know of and about each other, but you don’t really know each other.

Additionally, it is very hard to measure a relationship. You can’t necessarily say that spending thirty more minutes with a person will lead to a 10% increase in your friendship. It’s also extremely difficult to conceptualize a topic with many sensitive variables (personalities, emotions, communication, timing, etc.) that vary from person to person, relationship to relationship.

While this presents a challenge, there have been developments in ministry philosophy that we can examine in order to create a healthy framework from which to launch our journey of building relationships, no matter the circumstance you find yourself in. It is still an incredibly organic process that should remain natural at its core, but the following section of philosophies, insights, principles, strategies, and tips will equip you as a relational minister to foster a culture of relationship-building in your small group.

What is Relational Ministry?

Relational Ministry is a philosophy of ministry that is based on the character of God, who gives Himself in shared, loving relationship to other persons in the Trinity. For humans made in the image of God, relational ministry is the mutual giving of ourselves to other humans for a connectedness emotionally and spiritually. Whether you think of it as “doing life together” or “walking alongside of each other,” relational ministry at its core is just being with people. Student Ministries Pastor and Koinonia Advisor Evie Telfer asserts, “It is not a program or a project, but a time of discovery and wonder – entering together into a space that isn’t scripted.”

“Koinonia is the Greek word translated by our English New Testaments as communion, association, fellowship, sharing, common, contribution, and partnership. Not one of these words, however, adequately captures what the early Christians meant when they spoke of the koinonia they had with one another and Christ. Koinonia expressed a relationship of great intimacy and depth, one so rich in fact that it even became the favorite expression for the marital relationship.”

– Jordan Bajis (Common Ground)
Even though strategy and programming can generate opportunities for new friendships or enhance the growth of established relationships, relational ministry has no formula. Every relationship has its own story with unique challenges and breakthroughs. Still, it is extraordinarily helpful to develop a basic philosophy and theology of relational ministry. There are many approaches to relational ministry, so here are brief overviews of two philosophies from different perspectives.

**Friendship = Moving from Aloneness ➔ Community**

In his book, *Community: Building relationships within God’s family*, Bill Hybels conceptualizes relational ministry through the lens of friendship. Hybels highlights four components of true Christian friendship that inspire a movement from aloneness to community:

1. **Knowing and Being Known** – *Yeah we’re friends. We hang out, talk, and have fun. But they don’t really know me. I don’t think I really know them either.* Have you ever had this line of thinking as you’ve reflected on your standing with another person? It’s pretty common. One of the most fundamental desires of the human heart is to be known. When we say known, we of course mean more than just your name, year, major, and fun fact about your favorite food. We mean a level of understanding a person’s story, journey, personality, character, and soul. We all equally yearn for others to trust us enough to disclose the deep and tender parts of their lives (Hybels, K. Harney, and S. Harney 17).

2. **Loving and Being Loved** – Tim Keller observed, “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything” (45).

3. **Serving and Being Served** – In order to sustain deep relationships over a long period of time, there must be humility and a willingness to serve each other. In John 13, Jesus demonstrates the greatest moment of service by taking the position of a lowly servant giving us a powerful example to emulate as his disciples (Hybels, K. Harney, and S. Harney 31-32).

4. **Celebrate and Being Celebrated** – Scripture urges us to, “Rejoice with those who are rejoicing” (*New International Version*, Rom. 12.15). When we creatively celebrate each other, we step outside our own story and bring delight to another. Whether it’s through a powerful word of an encouragement that names their value, gifts, or the fruit they bear, or supporting them at their big concert, performance, or sporting event, celebrating each other is one of the most practical ways to build a friendship rooted in Christian love (Hybels, K. Harney, and S. Harney 38).
In his book, *Unfiltered Relationships*, Andrew Root challenges ministers to rethink relational ministry in light of organized ministry’s perceived goal of relationships. Instead of homing in on influence as our primary purpose in building relationships, Root encourages us to consider the personhood of another and the relationship itself as the end goal. Root notes that we sometimes get in the way of what God wants to do in a relationship when we focus primarily on influence. Our agendas often sell people the idea of Jesus rather than usher them into an encounter with Christ. Rather than focusing on “making things work or making them better,” Root advises that we seek to “simply spend time with others with the simple but profound desire to know them and their realities” (130). Root labels this philosophy of ministry as place-sharing: “Our relationships—where we truly see other persons and share their place—are the location of God’s presence in the world” (113). Here are three central movements that Root advises ministers to consider when re-conceptualizing relational ministry:

1. **Relationships are the goal, not a means to an end:** If I can be friends with this person, then I could really be able to… Have you ever consciously or subconsciously had this thought? Ministry philosophy sometimes convinces us that having a relationship is only part of the equation. It is one of the pieces that helps leverage our ability to reach an objective. Root puts up the stop sign here encouraging us to take a step back and authentically celebrate the relationship itself, “our relationships with others are not tools for influence, but rather something more beautiful and significant” (114). A relationship between two humans bearing the image of God is, after all, the location of God’s presence.

2. **From convincing to presence:** When influence is the driving force of our outlook on relationships, Root says that it becomes our task as relational ministers to move them in the direction of the Christ-likeness we envision. He declares this subconscious assignment unhealthy and unachievable: “I find myself completely inadequate to convince others through my relationship with them that they should take their faith seriously or believe something. I deeply desire it for them, but feel inadequate in my own power to make it happen” (115). Rather than manufacturing an argument that will convince them to follow Jesus, Root claims an authentic, genuine, and faithful relationship will usher in the presence of Christ and do what we can’t as humans. “Our call is to be with them, share in their place, see them as they are, invite them to see us as we are, and confess that Jesus is present between and with us” (115).

3. **From fixing to suffering:** When we let go of a goal-oriented approach to ministry, what does that leave us with? **Suffering** is essentially the answer to that question. Building on the previous two movements, Root encourages us to seek opportunities to suffer with and alongside of people, “Relational ministry is not about having the answers or being ‘cool;’ it’s rather about gently and sensitively joining [others] in their suffering. It’s not about fixing their suffering, but about being brave enough to see it and live with it” (84). This is where it gets tough. Because it’s easier to be the fixer, the third-party counselor, the person who just gives advice or the easy-answer to a tough situation without getting emotionally involved. Since we’re free from experiencing another’s pain, we remain
partially detached relationally when our disposition is to fix others. It is place-sharing and suffering that ushers us into the fullest connection with someone else, “Without the bravery to enter the deepest pains of [others’] existences, we have yet to truly know them, and therefore have yet to have relationship with them. The incarnation is the invitation to shared suffering; being incarnational is to live from the cross of Christ; it is to suffer” (79). There is certainly still an appropriate time for speaking the truth in love and offering our counsel, but perhaps our disposition should be to offer a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on, and a friendship that will be present during through pain.

It is important to note that Root doesn’t advocate against influencing others. Root actually demonstrates in his book that through this posture of place-sharing, he believes people ultimately influence others more lovingly, genuinely, and positively. Root envisions this journey of shining our light and being the aroma of Christ beautifully when he writes, “The goal isn’t to get them to talk as much as it is to allow them to join in our lives, to come close to us, and to watch as we seek to live faithfully as authentic human beings” (132).

**Principles of Relational Ministry (General)**

Building on the philosophies of Friendship and Place-Sharing, we now want to share some practical insights into relational ministry. Before talking specifically about serving as a small group leader, we want to highlight some key principles for doing relational ministry as a general practice with any person in your life (family member, friend, teammate, classmate, colleague, stranger, etc.).

1. **Prayer** – How do you become a better relational minister? How do you even find the opportunities to really be able to minister relationally to someone? Maybe the most simple, but powerful answer is to simply ask Jesus. Ask God for the opportunities to walk alongside others and to invest relationally in who they are. Ask for the ability to speak truth and life into the brokenness of those closest to you. Ask for the character and spiritual formation that will allow you to become a shepherd to those lost sheep in your life. Just as Jesus prayed for his disciples to find true community in John 17, we can pray that our friends and family would find truth, life, and love from our relationship with them. We can boldly come before the throne of grace and ask that God would shape us into better relational ministers to those around us.

2. **Self-Care** – “Your relationship-building potential with your horizontal relationships is directly tied to the maturity level of your vertical relationship with God” (Hybels, K. Harney, and S. Harney 29). Relationship-building involves the joining of two or more sinful, broken people at emotionally and spiritually deep levels. Consequently, relationships are intimidating, painful, demanding, and exhausting (among many other things). When you are properly taking care of your soul and allowing God to fill you with his Spirit, there is less fear of failure, more healing from injury, more security in identity, and a greater source of energy and compassion. Bottom-line: take care of yourself. Don’t compromise your own relationship with Jesus and the activities/disciplines that are most life-giving to you for the sake of relational ministry. It’s not selfish; it’s wisdom.
Boundaries – In broken world, we live in community with sinful people. With so many relational viruses at such close proximity, our world inherently offers both a significant opportunity and risk for Christians. On the one hand, it is easy to get sucked into other people’s ‘baggage’ in unhealthy ways. Motivated to be everyone’s superhero, many try to ‘be there’ for all the people they know who are struggling. Hybels notes how devastating this can be to one’s personality, “You can have a hard time identifying feelings and preferences in your own life because you’re always playing doctor to those people in your life who have relational viruses” (42). As a result, it is easy to become exhausted and bitter toward those who need you. Hybels encourages us to reflect on these questions:

- How do you respond to people who demand your time when others also need it?
- How do you respond to people in your life who are constantly asking you to fix things for them or help them?
- How do you establish healthy boundaries for anger-filled relationships where you face criticism and harsh words?

On the flip side, many take the opposite extreme with boundaries and put up a wall of apathy and distance in every relationship to protect from potential hurt (Hybels, K. Harney, and S. Harney 43). Although these walls may make life easier in the short term, it also prevents rich and meaningful relationships from developing. As we know from C.S. Lewis’s writing, “To love at all is to be vulnerable” (169). Emotional, psychological, and even spiritual toll is the risk inherent to relationship-building. And while it is always work the risk, there still needs to be a healthy balance between living without boundaries and closing ourselves off to all possible relational pains.

Supporting vs. Counseling

*One special note about boundaries that may come into play for small group leaders is dealing with issues that are beyond your capacity to understand or treat. As a spiritual leader on a college campus, it is entirely possible and even likely that you will encounter people struggling with mental illness, addiction, disorders, history of abuse, etc. It is important in these situations to remember your role as a small group leader. You are a friend and supporter, not a professional counselor or doctor (Donahue B. 152). Be responsible by utilizing the individuals and resources on campus (Resident Assistant, Resident Director, Engle Center, etc.) to ensure they receive proper care. If you are having difficulty discerning what you should do in a case like this, you can always contact the Kore Team (koinoina@messiah.edu) or your RA without using names.
3. **Relationships take time and work** – Just as a plant’s growth is a gradual process of giving sunlight, watering, and pruning, relationships don’t bloom overnight. It takes a lot of time and work to really get to know someone and vice versa. Here’s the big challenge: There is a fine line between gently pushing one another out of the comfort zone and forcing something that isn’t there. Perhaps the easiest way to destroy relationships is to demand and expect a level of intimacy that the other person isn’t ready for (Root 146). Be patient, but also be willing to put in the time and work to get to that place.

4. **Listening** – You’ll see this principle a couple of more times when we get even more specific. That’s because it’s so important to “be slow to speak and quick to listen” when building relationships with others (James 1.19). Genuinely offering a listening ear is itself ministry to another’s soul; however, it is also the gateway to sharing words of life. Listen intently for opportunities to generously affirm positive actions and steps; to name strengths, gifts, and character traits; to probe feelings, emotions, and desires; to push them on towards love and good deeds when necessary.

5. **Speak the truth in love** – One of the many privileges of developing a strong relationship with another person is the ability to speak the truth in love to one another. Though one of the more difficult callings of Christian friendship, shedding light on the darkness in each other’s lives is a necessary practice for both individual and corporate growth in Christ. Paul urges the Church to develop this habit of “speaking the truth in love, so that we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4.15). It is important to remember that rebuke, exhortation, and counsel should always be motivated by love, full of grace, and marked by gentle words. This is yet another area, though, that requires an attentiveness and discernment to the Spirit as to when it is appropriate.
Principles of Relational Ministry

(Small Group Leader specific)

Now that we’ve covered some basic principles of relational ministry at-large, here are some more specific principles of relational ministry for small group leaders. In compiling these principles, we’ve drawn from our own experience, from the wisdom of mentors and pastors who have gone before us, and from valuable resources and voices in the field of relational ministry.

1. **Create expectations to meet with God** – Small groups are fun. It’s a chance to be with people you enjoy (or at least mostly enjoy, hopefully😊) and share something in common. In some cases, you may not see each other very often outside of the weekly meeting. While fun is an ingredient of a healthy small group, the ultimate purpose of a small group is to encounter God. As the small group leader, it is your responsibility and privilege to remind the group week in and week out that this is a holy time—a time to grow in our relationship with Jesus and with others. Everyone has dedicated and set aside this time for a greater purpose than fun—to encounter the living God in a real way through the body of the believers that is present in your small group community. There are many different ways a leader can create this expectation, and you may want to try a few of these to see what works for your group:
   - Weekly opening prayers that purposefully prepare everyone’s hearts and minds to encounter God.
   - Pointed questions during the study that push one another to be attuned to how God might be speaking to them through the content or the sharing of other members.
   - Silent reflection or meditation at some point during the meeting (and then an opportunity to partner up and share what God was revealing).
   - Intercessory prayer for one another.

Certainly you have the freedom to be creative and adventurous with your ideas, but also be discerning as to what will most faithfully usher the group into awareness of God’s presence.

2. **Culture of vulnerability** – One of the catch phrases for Koinonia is “grow deep.” Small groups are designed to be places where a body of believers can navigate beyond the surfaces, the masks, the facades of life and into the raw personhood of people. Without this depth it’s just another room of warm bodies that may have fun together hanging out. Developing depth, though, whether in a group or in any relationship, requires vulnerability. If you (collectively) are going to step into each other’s lives for the purpose of really knowing and being known, then you’ve got to share your life, your actual life. You’ve got to pull out the baggage of emotions, fears, sins, weaknesses, regrets, trials, and pains. Although it comes easier to our generation and has become such a buzz word in Christian leadership circles today, vulnerability (especially communal vulnerability) is still quite elusive—and especially difficult to dictate as a leader. It may be something
you’re completely comfortable with, or it may be the first time you’re revealing certain areas of your life to more than one set of ears. Another complication with vulnerability is that it will likely come more naturally to some of your group members than others.

We will talk more about how you can set the vulnerability tone as the leader from the get-go, but it is worth taking some time to develop a plan for being vulnerable yourself and cultivating a culture of vulnerability among everyone else.

- Maybe you explain to the group through scripture, story, or experience how vital vulnerability is to the life and fruit of a group.
- Perhaps you suggest committing to vulnerability as a core value in your group’s covenant.
- A strong option (one that we highly recommend for Koinonia groups) is purposeful story-telling (see below).

3. **Intentional relationship building** – As we have mentioned before, relationship building is at its best when the process is organic. However, strong relationships don’t just happen without any proactive steps. Additionally, a natural process does not exclude intentional efforts to put yourself and others in a good place for potential connection and growth. Strong and healthy relationships are not going to just fall into your lap. Small group leaders must be intentional in seeking out opportunities to create, develop, and strengthen relationships with their members or else the connection just won’t reach its potential. While group meetings are special times that allow for relational growth, there is usually not a sufficient amount of time to build real koinonia or friendship. Plan on following up to deepen and further personalize the stuff that comes up in the large group. There are also certain elements of friendship that only evolve through 1 on 1 or smaller group conversations and connections.

So…is there someone in the group whose story you would love to know more? Set up a time to get coffee or lunch together! Has someone in your group shared that they have been feeling lonely? Stop by their apartment or dorm room every now and then to hang out or take them along to the grocery store or soccer game. Perhaps someone has expressed a genuine desire to take the next step in their faith or work through a major area of sin? Consider meeting regularly with this individual to disciple or even mentor them through this stage in their journey with Jesus. It is incredible how simply taking the initiative to spend quality time with another person breaks down walls and sets the connection on a course for real friendship. **Time** does wonders for relationships.
4. **Healthy relationship dynamics** - You’re not going to be able to be super-close with everyone in your group. This is not your responsibility as a small group leader, nor should it be your goal. Not even Jesus did that with all 12 of the disciples! It’s unhealthy, unsustainable, and unrealistic as a college student. You have other commitments, responsibilities, and people in your life that need your time. It will require discernment on your part how to spend your time intentionally developing these relationships outside of the meeting times. Remember this illustration back on page 52:

The second model is more representative of what you should strive in terms of healthy relationship dynamic. As your small group grows in depth and closeness, friendships will develop and people will meet up with each other. That’s great! Don’t feel left out and don’t try to be part of every group interaction. Something that we will talk about later is empowering and encouraging other members in your group to foster this type of relationship with other members in the group so the burden is not all on you!

5. **Active listening and asking** – We will continue expanding on this topic when we come to story-telling, but listening actively is crucial for small group leaders hoping to genuinely minister to their group of members. What is going on in their life—the good and the bad? How are they actually doing? What is on their mind lately? Did they bring up what they had mentioned last week? How have they been growing or sliding in their faith? How is their relationship with God? What did they pick up on during the lesson or discussion that readily relates to what is happening in their life? Is there something they didn’t pick up on that would be applicable to their current situation? Often, even if the person doesn’t speak much, the meeting time will give insight into these areas of the person’s life even without you asking.

From there, it is helpful to think about your role. How can you come alongside certain members in your group with specific follow up questions that can help unpack and process life’s events? Intentionally asking pointed questions that follow up on what you observed during the meeting is one way of thinking about it. Attention to detail goes a long way in building trust and opening doors for sharing because it reveals that you value that person. You can also ask them about the prayer request they shared or ask them what they thought of the last bible study. When you are actively listening and asking, small group time can be a launching pad for deepening relationships with your members.

If you’re interested in learning more about how to actively listen, this website is an extremely useful resource that will help you hone this interpersonal and leadership skill: [http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html)
Here is a helpful chart about the difference between passive listening and active listening:

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<th>Passive Listening</th>
<th>Active Listening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td>Rejecting, critical</td>
<td>Receptive, accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I’m really not interested.”</td>
<td>“I really want to hear.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Me – what I want to say</td>
<td>Other person – you think about what others are saying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What do I think?”</td>
<td>“What does he/she mean?”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
<td>This is what I’ve been thinking</td>
<td>Telling first what you have heard the other person say OR asking what the other person is thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think you should…”</td>
<td>“You feel like…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“What have you been thinking?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Message</strong></td>
<td>What you said isn’t important</td>
<td>You heard both the feeling and the need in the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I didn’t really hear what you said.”</td>
<td>“I heard what you said.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
<td>Frustration, anger</td>
<td>Satisfaction, willing to compromise or tell more</td>
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<td>“I don’t care.”</td>
<td>“I care about what you said. Would you tell me more?”</td>
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Barriers to Relationship Building

Although every small group has its own unique challenges and hurdles, we’ve outlined a handful of universal relationship-building barriers that are common to nearly every small group.

1. **Mutual comfort zone**: The tendency of our human nature is to stay within a perceived comfort zone, particularly in a group of people we don’t fully trust. As a result, there’s a mentality in a small group that *as long as you don’t push me, then I won’t push you*. The psychological and emotional challenge (and un-comfortability!) of answering difficult questions, sharing deeply personal stories, confessing sins and failures, challenging one another’s behaviors, mindset and attitudes, and offering accountability for struggles can be scary! These activities all present awkwardness, vulnerability, and sometimes tension. Beneath the mindset bent on maintaining a mutual comfort zone is the assumption that small group time is nothing more than a “hangout” or a bible study (an academic study of the bible can be a barrier of its own).

*Breaking Barrier #1*: A leader can move the group to overcome this barrier by establishing some **shared stated goals and expectations**. Goals and expectations not only clearly communicate and clarify the practical out-workings of the group’s purpose, but they also set the group on a designed course with the freedom to keep one another focused and accountable. Here are some examples of helpful goals and expectations that would break the barrier of the mutual comfort zone:

- This is a group where we want to seek and experience life-change together.
- This is a group where we really want to step into each other’s stories
- This is a group where we will share what is really going on in our lives and invite others to intercede with prayer and friendship.

When goals and expectations like these are stated, the leader and other members are free to say things like:

- *Let’s remember what we’re really here for.*
- *I think dedicating this time to pray for one another is all something we want.*
- *If we’re really going to be a group that knows one another, then we should hear from everyone.*
- *How can we better support you and keep you accountable?*

Shared stated goals and expectations also reduce the amount of assumptions that members will make about the group’s purpose and functions.
2. **Holding back and hiding:** Often time people go into small groups thinking, *I don’t think I can talk about that. I’m only going to share what I want them to know.* The tendency to hold back and hide from sharing our not-so-glamourous side can plague a small group’s relational growth. Similar to the previous barrier, this attitude often stems from a fear of judgement. If the rest of group knows their “dirt”, then people imagine how the group might view or treat them differently. They fear they won’t be welcomed, treated normally, or belong anymore. A tendency toward secrecy can also be influenced by a lack of trust. Particularly early on, members understandably may wonder if they can really be certain that what they say will actually stay in the group. They fear having their secret spread all over the floor, the classroom, or campus. Collectively functioning and acting on this mindset as a group easily leads to superficiality and even pretentiousness since there is no emotional risk without authentic vulnerability.

*Breaking Barrier #2:* A leader must strategically plan to implement relational principle #2 to overcome this barrier. **Purposeful story-telling** (see below) will hopefully solve a lot of problems here, but a **confidentiality agreement** will be a safe way to solidify the members’ sense of security and trust with sharing. This is a very delicate component of small groups. If one secret gets out, then the whole group is ruined. It’s no longer a trusted safe zone, so authentic sharing and vulnerability flounders with a lack of security and a fear of gossip. Until some members can be assured of the group’s commitment to confidentiality, they may not share anything personal they are not willing to let out beyond the group.

3. **Self-Reliance:** As American ideals and Western thinking have infiltrated the Church, individualism has reared its ugly head. Many millennials especially have convinced themselves that they can do life on their own. *I don’t need help; I don’t need prayer; I don’t need to share this; I’ll figure it out myself; I wouldn’t want to burden other people anyways.* Unfortunately this attitude of self-reliance undermines spiritual growth and the purpose of small groups. Jordan Bajis, author of *Common Ground: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity for the American Christian*, writes, “Many Christians demonstrate individualism in their Christianity, thinking it is a sign of discipleship, when in actuality it weakens them and the bond of genuine fellowship within the Church” (148). A small group full of self-reliant individuals will never be able to “do life” together or experience koinonia.
Breaking Barrier #3: A good friend of mine (who was also a member of my small group) walked into my apartment room one evening with a grim look on his face, “Can we talk about stuff?” Two of my roommates (who were also in the small group) were also in the room. After sharing with us a long list of struggles—depression, loneliness, self-confidence, betrayal, and current relationship conflict—this friend of mine shamefully muttered, “I just have so much crap (except he may have used another word 😅) in my life and I don’t know what to do with it.” One of my roommates quickly responded, “We want to deal with your crap.”

In order to help people in our small group realize that self-reliance is not healthy or possible, we need to invite our small group to a new perspective on life’s crap. We need to move from the mentality of “my problem to “our” problem. Certainly we’re not suggesting that people don’t take responsibility for their own actions or lives, but we take responsibility by reaching out, asking for help, and leaning on each other. John Wesley once described a beautiful picture of Christian community as a place where we “watch over one another in love.” We know from scripture that “it is not good for the man to be alone,” so let’s show our small groups a better way than individualism and isolation—the communal way (Gen. 2.18). Something that one of my small groups has done in the past to make this communal shift is to ask each member—how can we support you?—after they talk about a problem, a struggle, or even a prayer request. This allows the individual to express how the small group can actually share the burden and practically help them.

Story-Telling

You’ve either lived it or heard it: knowing and trusting sets the stage for real, authentic sharing to exist in a group setting. Likewise, conversation that goes beyond the surface and speaks into the lives and souls of those in a group doesn’t happen without being known and trusted. Without these two components, our small group’s potential for spiritual growth is limited. That’s where story-telling comes into play.

Maybe you’ve always called it sharing testimonies, but we prefer the terminology story-telling. Story-telling is our avenue for knowing and being known. It is a platform for trusting and being trusted. There may be nothing more powerful in this world than telling each other our stories. We all have them, and they’re all a beautiful reflection of God’s image and work (whether we choose to see them as such or not).

There is so much that story-telling does for building relationship. It communicates basic, but vital information. It conveys a longing, even a need for friendship. It uncovers personality and depth. It boldly says I trust you with this. It reveals passions, desires, and hopes. It invites
awareness of past and present struggles, baggage, and fears. All of this so that others might be able to enter into that story by understanding, relating, and encouraging. On a more practical level, story-telling allows for follow-up, accountability, guidance, pointed questioning, relevant discussion, and specific prayer. It is often, too, a time when members find synergy and common ground with each other.

Story-telling also transforms and enhances the study portion of small group time. Digging into scripture together doesn’t stop at an intellectual or academic level, but it builds toward a common self-reflection on application: What is God teaching us from this passage in light of our stories? By disclosing our lives to the group and entering into one another’s story, we are moved to gently challenge of one another: How does this relate to what you are going through right now?

How to Do Purposeful Story-Telling

Let’s talk through the ins and outs of purposeful story-telling so that you might have a practical guide for doing this with your group.

Who: We’re looking at you. The leader must go first. You’ll hear that from just about every small group leader who has gone before you. And it’s a huge step for you as their leader towards winning their trust, respect, and commitment just by being willing to go first.

What: As we’ll see in the next section, it is not a one-time event. However, for our purposes, we’re concentrating on the first time your group members share their story with each other. During this time, each person will talk about themselves--their family, friends, childhood, youth, spiritual growth, memorable events, significant experiences, etc.--gradually unveiling their life, and indirectly, their soul. There is an infinite amount of ways to tell a single life story (even if you’re only 18 years old!). For that reason, grant your members freedom to give testimony as they see fit. Encourage them to be themselves. As the leader, you will want to think about a very basic parameter: estimated time allotment. You will have individuals who can talk for days if you let them. You’ll also have members who will be hard pressed to talk for more than 2 minutes. Having a flexible, but standard time range will provide boundary and clarity. Again there are many directions you can go with this, but we’ve seen groups work best with a 5-15 minute range. If you want to give story-telling time more structure, here are some options that may bring some focus, purpose, clarity, and even comfort.

- Frame your story-telling around a question(s) to answer:
  - Who has been the most influential person in your life?
  - What event(s) has shaped you the most?
  - What has God taught you in life? What is he teaching you now?
What is the most meaningful attribute of God to you? How have you seen that attribute at work over the course of your life?

More than anything, you would like to be remembered as a person who...

If your life could be summed up in a six-word memoir, then what would it be?

Feel free to think of your own!

- Give broad categories from which to speak about
  - Examples: family, friends, church, school, spiritual, etc.

When: It very well could be the first or second meeting. We’ve been in small groups where everyone has shared their full story in the first gathering or two, others where only the leader has shared in the first meeting, and still others when we took it one story at a time (1 person shared each meeting). We’ve also been in contexts where we’ve waited for a month or even a semester. A semester should probably the maximum amount of time for waiting, because we want to build that trust and intimacy early. Check out the note below about discerning this decision for your small group. One more thing to consider about timing is that just because you’ve already shared your story once together doesn’t mean that it has to be the only time. In fact, it shouldn’t be!

Something our groups have done is having a meeting or two at the beginning of each year dedicated to telling our stories again. We see how people change. We witness emerging desires and passions. We hear what God was teaching one another this summer and how that fits into a larger story. We might see a transformation, healing, or new perspective on past experiences that were a part of that original story. Don’t stop telling each other your story! It’s a validation that God is always at work.

How: The tone, depth, and vulnerability that you set as the leader will model story-telling for your group. This may in fact be the first time one of your members is sharing their story to a group of people. Even for those who have had past experience, they’ll still be carefully watching you to determine how they’ll proceed. As a result, leaders need to ask themselves:

- Am I centering my story on God and his work in my life? How much so?
- How vulnerable, authentic, and deep am I in my story-telling?
- How much of the tough, dark, and uncomfortable parts of my story am I sharing?

Consciously or unconsciously, your members are going to follow your lead in these areas and many others. They almost certainly are not going to go deeper than you with their sharing. Often times they will match your level of vulnerability or hold back just a little above your depth.

Whenever you decide to facilitate the story-telling for your group, you will want to inform your members. Even if it is the first meeting, let them know in the email that is what you are planning so that they can prepare. Another minor point--taking volunteers, whether you have a bunch of people share during one meeting or you follow the 1 by 1 model, is usually more fruitful and natural than going in a circle. If your group is very hesitant to share, then you may want to take a step back and consider doing more team-building (the Loft is a great resource for this!).
**Why**: We mentioned above that story-telling creates opportunities for follow-up when we are intentionally listening. What a privilege it is to know the most sensitive parts, both good and bad, of another person’s life. Hopefully small groups then become a place where we purposefully check-in, keep accountable, encourage, and ask questions. Though this might sound silly and logistical, it’s SO helpful to keep a diary or notebook of what people say during their stories. After all, it is their story. It’s stuff that you won’t be hearing every day and will certainly want to remember for following-up. Don’t go crazy, but a few notes will make quite a difference.

Based on commonalities that you noticed between stories (because you were intentionally listening!), you may be able to connect members in your group with each other. It may take a little push like—*Hey Amanda, did you notice that you and Kelsey have a lot of similarities between your stories? I mean you both regret growing apart from your siblings and wish that could change...maybe that’s something you could talk together about!* You won’t be able to relate to everyone’s story to the same degree, so see this as an empowering pastoral step in facilitating relationships and even shepherding between others.

**Note**: The leader must be extremely sensitive to their group and discerning of the Holy Spirit’s leading. Every group is different. While it may be perfectly suitable for some groups to “dive” into their story-telling from the outset of the first meeting, other groups may take a couple of meetings before reaching an environment conducive for deep, real, and substantive story-telling. We still advise that leaders gentle push their groups early-on to enter the uncomfortable realm of sharing stories (even if they are not 100% ready), and that is best modeled by having the leader share their story first during the first meeting. Doing life together is always the goal in small groups, and that will not happen without the vulnerability of its group members when sharing stories and what they are going through currently.

**Conclusion**

What do we ultimately want in our small groups? Well, in a way, we want small groups to be a place where people move from being **strangers to friends**. A place where people know they are loved. A place full of koinonia. We hope and pray that this section will guide you towards creating that place for your members.
Sources and Additional Resources


(Note to reader: This book is filled with ideas for conversation starters and ideas of outreach. Some of them are silly and funny, but many of them are serious, thought-provoking questions to get your small group thinking.)


Closing Remarks

Well, there you have it, my ideas, professional advice, and suggestions I stole from fellow students (with their permission, of course!). They are all wrapped up and tied with a bow, and that is just great, except your group will not always be as neat and tidy as my list, and I pray that most of the time it’s not! I think one of the best pieces of advice I ever received as a leader was to be thankful for my mess-ups because in those moments, you depend on God fully and you realize that he is working powerfully in your life. Don’t forget that. He is moving through you. You are his beloved child whom he called to this group and to this campus. Even if you completely mess up, God still loves you, and so will the members in your group. Learn from it. Grow.

Also, do not go about your life focusing on the moments that did not go the way that you had planned. Instead, look for the little surprises, and the moments that make you take a step back or leave you dumbfounded. Those happy little moments will surprise you, so try not to focus so much on your perfect plans that you miss those small occurrences.

And lastly, have fun! This is not some cut and dry activity where I can tell you what to do. I know that you probably have a million ideas of your own to try out with your group. Enjoy the journey, and don’t forget to go with the flow.

Prayers and best wishes!

Sam

“It can be uncomfortable to do something you’re not used to or don’t feel you are skilled with. That’s the cool part though because if there are no challenges, then you may think you’re doing it on your own and don’t really need God’s help. But if He can help you and get you through what may seem impossible, then His power and glory shines through and He gets the round of applause, not you.”

– Kaelyn Beaudette 2016

“Being a small group leader is quite simply the highlight of my college career. It taught me what real community is, and how to live well relationally with other humans of like-minds/faith. It taught me to love even when the answers aren’t clear and the circumstances less than ideal. And it taught me how to love God better and in turn offer that love to others.”

– Richelle Corty 2014
During my time at Messiah College, there may be no better word to describe my journey than *koinonia*—both in terms of the Greek meaning and the official organization name here on campus. It began when I gathered a group of guys on my first year floor after our second floor meeting. I threw out the idea of starting a bible study, but made it clear that I didn’t want to be the *leader*. A couple of them later turned to me during the meeting and said, “Ah you should be our leader, Stephen. You could do it!” And the rest is history.

I decided to lead that guys’ bible study on my floor and then co-led a second small group with some friends. Both groups met during all four years of my career at Messiah. While this was quite demanding at times, it was SO worth it. My small groups quickly became the highlights of my week and I wouldn't have traded them for anything! I've developed friendships that will last a lifetime, strong spiritual bonds with brothers, and a deeper understanding of God. I’ve had so many enlightening conversations and life-changing service experiences through my leadership in these groups. I've also gained a more profound appreciation for studying Scripture, caring for people, and connecting on a spiritual level with friends.

Leading a small group will be perhaps one of the most frustrating and annoying experiences of your life. It’s messy; it’s unpredictable; it’s uncomfortable. However, it will also more than likely be one of the most fruitful and meaningful experiences. It’s inspiring; it’s transformational; it’s life-giving. For me, small groups have been the most tangible demonstration of a beauty unlike any other: God’s grace meeting humanity’s brokenness. And that’s why I can’t live without them. I hope and pray you feel the same way.

Stephen
Appendix

4-Mat Learning Styles Quiz
Icebreakers
Bonding Activities
Appendix 1: 4-Mat Learning Styles Quiz

Please score yourself on a scale of 1 to 4 for each of the items below. 4 being very much like me and 1 being not at all like me.

4 – Very much like me
3 – Much like me
2 – Somewhat like me
1 – Not at all like me

Section A:
___ I tend to do my best work when I'm with other people
___ I like a colorful working environment
___ I like essay-type answers to questions, rather than specific fill-in-the-blank answers
___ I value friendships above responsibilities
___ People describe me as a really nice person
___ Part of my self-identity is wrapped up in the number of friends I have and the strength of those friendships
___ Three words that describe me are friendly, expressive, hugger

Section B:
___ I do my best work alone, after gathering information I need from books or teachers
___ I like to work at a desk or table
___ I like to solve problems by finding the right answer
___ I see myself as an information giver/sharer
___ People tend to view me as a really smart person
___ Part of my self-identity is wrapped up in how smart others think I am
___ Three words that describe me are rational, detailed, smart

Section C:
___ I do my best work alone, putting together information so it will work
___ I like to work with my hands, as well as my mind
___ I like to solve problems by checking out my own ideas
___ I see myself as a trainer, helping others do what needs to be done
___ People describe me as a hard worker, a results-oriented person
___ Part of my self-identity is wrapped up in how well my creations work
___ Three words that describe me are active, realistic, practical
Section D:
___ I do my best work brainstorming new ideas and trying things not many people would dare to try
___ I like playing with new ideas
___ I like to solve problems by making guesses and following hunches
___ I see myself as a facilitator or idea-stimulator
___ People describe me as a highly creative person
___ I tend to come up with ideas quickly when given group assignments
___ Three words that describe me are curious, leader, visionary

Total up your scores for each section:
Group A ______

Group B ______

Group C ______

Group D ______

If you scored mostly As, you are an imaginative learner
If you scored mostly Bs, you are an analytical learner
If you scored mostly Cs, you are a common sense learner
If you scored mostly Ds, you are a dynamic learner
Appendix 2: Icebreakers

Icebreakers are the bread and butter of building relationships during small group meetings. It is a fantastic way of getting to know one another and increasing the level of intimacy because people are sharing personal information. Many of these questions/activities can be used at the beginning of the meeting.

- **Friendship questions:** Questions people ask when they are first getting to know each other – go around in a circle – these are great for a first meeting to get the basics. There are different levels of depth in this list:
  
  o Where is your favorite place you’ve lived? Least favorite?
  o How many siblings do you have?
  o What are your favorite and least favorite foods?
  o What was your first job?
  o What is your favorite Bible verse? Why?
  o Who was your favorite childhood friend and why?
  o What was the dumbest thing you ever spent money on?
  o What was your favorite book or story as a child? What did you like about it?
  o What is the scariest thing you’ve ever done?
  o What is your best time of day?
  o What were the high and low points of the past week?
  o What ability do you wish you had that you don’t? Why?
  o What is the most frightening experience you’ve ever had?
  o What is one of your fondest memories as a child?
  o Who was the person you felt closest to?
  o Have people in your group write a fact about themselves on a piece of paper without their name on it. Collect them, and then read them having people guess who each one is about.
  o Play the game “Two Truths and A Lie”. Each person says three facts about themselves; two are true and one is false. Other people in the group then have to guess which one they think is the lie. This game can get outrageous and you learn interesting facts about your group members.

- **What if questions:** These shed a little more light into the depth of a person, but also don’t force people to share more than they want to.
  
  o If you could not fail, what would you do?
  o If you had one “re-do” in your life, what would you go back and do over?
  o If you could be doing anything you wanted in this moment, what would it be?
  o If you were on a desert island, what are the three things you would take with you?
  o If you were told you had only one week to live, how would you spend it?
  o If you met Jesus face-to-face today, what questions would you like to ask Him?
  o If you received $5,000 as a gift, how would you spend it?
- **Reflection questions/activities**: These require a little more knowledge of and comfortability with other group members, so save these until the group’s closeness has developed a little.

  o What person has had the most influence on your spiritual life?
  o Describe three characteristics of an ideal friend.
  o Complete the sentence: More than anything, I would like to be remembered as a person who…
  o What character in the Bible do you most relate to?
  o What activity you the most life?
  o What are you passionate about?
  o What is your favorite name for God?
  o What three emotions do you feel the most often?
  o When in your life did God seem closest to you?
  o What do you want to be remembered for?
  o Give each person a list of everyone’s names in the group. Have them write a sentence about each person focusing on their strengths and what they bring to the group dynamic. Then go in a circle and read what each person listed for one person. Continue on through everyone. A very powerful time of encouragement.
  o Pass a plate of different cookies around the circle (Oreos, animal crackers, chocolate chip, sugar, etc.) and ask people to pick the one that they think best represents them and why.
  o Gather a random collection of objects (rubber band, eraser, water bottle, flower, wristband, keys, flashlight, etc.). Have each member of the group take turns sharing which object best represents their spiritual journey.
Appendix 3: Bonding activities

Here are a handful of fun activities you can do with your small group outside of your meeting time. There is no substitute for a shared, meaningful experience as a group:

- Eat a meal together
- Make a meal or dessert
- Have a board game or a sports night
- Go to church together
- Go on a hike
- Have a crafting party
- Have prayer or accountability partners to meet with during the week
- Go sledding
- Volunteer at Bethesda Mission or the Paxton Home
- Swim or tube in the breeches
- Go to a Messiah sporting event, concert, or SAB special activity
- Watch a movie
- Have a viewing party for a sports game, political debate, or awards show on TV in someone’s apartment
- Go to a park
- Go on a service trip or service day event
- Have a progressive prayer night – go around to each person’s room and have a few people pray for that person in their own space.
- Go on a day adventure to a small town on a weekend
- Do a team-building activity with the Loft
- Build a snowman or snow fort. A snowball fight is an inevitable must.
- Go to the library to do homework together
- Go thrifting together and see who can come up with the most ridiculous object or article of clothing
- Go to the gym together – working out is more fun with people anyway
- Attend a Koinonia event like gingerbread house-making
- Celebrate a holiday together. Carve pumpkins for Halloween, go ice skating on Presidents’ Day, or make tacos on Cinco de Mayo!
- Add your own ideas. These are just a few to get you started.

“Make a point to try and have the whole group hangout outside of Bible study time whether that is going for a walk, playing games, going out to eat, etc. It’s something that allows your group to continue to bond and grow together outside of the parameters of just the usual meeting time for Bible study.”

– Lauren Stratton 2016