An Insider's Guide to Starting in Small Group Ministry

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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, there is obviously a reason you are doing this, and a reason God has led you and your group together.

The first step to success 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. There is struggle and failure in following God’s calling, but with faith and dedication, you can and your group can experience God’s plan for you.

I 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 an idea that seems fitting for your group setting. This is meant to be a guide for YOU and your small group.

While I am not going to dictate how you use this reference, here are my 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 motivations of your group members? And what sort of study would you like to focus on?
- 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 GROUP dynamics, and how to help people with different learning styles work better together. What are some approaches you can use to address any issues you might encounter in your small group?
- How can you create an environment that is conducive to open communication and builds strong relationships?
- Read your Bible. Spend time reflecting on the Word. 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 of your group. We will study why people learn the way they do, and what impacts different views on scripture. This section can be used as a way to get to know the members of your group and understand why they do what they do.

In Part II, we will focus on group dynamics after you have begun to understand the individuals in your group. This section also explains how to plan for differences and help with communication. This is crucial to the health of your small group. The last section focuses on building relationships. This is where some of the more “hands-on” application occurs and where there will be examples of approaches to try with your group.

At the end of each section I 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!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PART I:

**Individuals** ......................................................................................................................... page 5

A. Learning Differences ........................................................................................................... page 6

B. Spirituality Types ................................................................................................................ page 12

## PART II:

**Groups** ................................................................................................................................... page 17

A. Dynamics ............................................................................................................................... page 18

B. Planning for Differences ...................................................................................................... page 28

C. Communication .................................................................................................................... page 32

D. Relationship Building .......................................................................................................... page 38

## APPENDIX .............................................................................................................................. page 44
Part 1: Focusing on the Individual

Learning Differences & Spirituality Types
Learning Differences

There are numerous ways of looking at learning differences, but in this section, I will be focusing on two that I think 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 identifies the extent to which a person fits in each one of these categories by observing how they act, understand, and remember in different ways (Smith, 2008). 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?

These categories are detailed in depth by Driscoll and Nagel (2010). Here is my summary of that and some added examples.

- **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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010).
- **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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 (Driscoll & Nagel, 2010). 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 I have used with my group, 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 all:** Here are some of my ideas on how to adapt a lesson for each of the categories above.

- **How to adapt 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.

- **How to adapt for 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!

- **How to adapt for 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.

- **How to adapt for 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.

- **How to adapt for 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.

- **How to adapt for 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.

- **How to adapt for 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.

- **How to adapt for 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 (McCarthy, 2006). 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 (McCarthy, 2006). 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 (McCarthy, 2006). 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 (McCarthy, 2006). 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. I 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 Bredfeldt 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 (Teaching Effectively, 2003). 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 like to look at things in-depth or study them intensely (Teaching Effectively, 2003). 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 (Teaching Effectively, 2003). 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 (Teaching Effectively, 2003). 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 I am 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.


- Here is some more detailed information about multiple intelligences.


- 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.

Teaching effectively in ministry situations. (2003). Leadership training curriculum (pp. 2) The Orlando Institute.

- This is more information on the HBLT method
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 an illustration created by Fry, Telfer, Curry, Smith, Bosserman, and McHugh (2008) that shows how different people experience their spiritual lives (p. 15).

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 (Fry et al., 2008).

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 (Fry et al., 2008).

**Activist** – People with this spirituality type connect with God through serving, doing and relating (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008).

**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 (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008).

**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 (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008).

**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 (Fry et al., 2008). 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 (Fry et al., 2008).

**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! Here are some ideas.
Incorporating Spirituality Types into Your Small Group:

Some of these suggestions are mine, and some are based off of suggestions made by the college Chaplains 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. (On a side note, it is best not to ask for someone’s testimony during the first meeting. It can get really personal really fast and some people are not ready for that until they get to know you better.) But, I digress. 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, worshiping, 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, I am dominantly an interpersonal learner. Group work is my favorite, and I love people. This makes sense with my spirituality type because I am dominantly an activist. I love 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 2: Focusing on the Group

Dynamics
Planning for 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, I 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”. Now, I have to admit, while I agree that here at Messiah College, we often overuse and abuse that word, but overall, it is truly what we are 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 try not to miss weeks.**
  - 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 I 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. I 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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 (Long, et al., 1995). 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. I have been leading a small group for the past three years, and after learning from my mistakes, I have compiled this list so you don’t have to!

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 schedules and commit to it. This will make it so much easier planning for the next meeting and the rest of the semester.

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.
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. Like I said above, you are not a pastor and are not expected to give a sermon every week. Actually, I think 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 I am 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.
Planning for Differences

The first step in planning for differences is realizing differences. After taking some time to get to know the members of your group (see Part I for help in this area) it is important to address the differences in your group in a healthy way. We will spend some time looking at differences you may run into, and practical ways you can diffuse conflict or start meaningful conversations about them.

Theological Differences

This may be the first big difference that you encounter in your group. We all go to the same school but that does not mean that we all believe the same things. Even at a Christian school, people do not fit into nice little theological categories. I can’t say everyone who believes A will also believe B, or if someone says X it means Y. Theology is not that easy, but we can talk a little about what problems you might encounter and how to work through them.

Problem 1: The Theologian vs. the Novice

A problem that you are likely to encounter in a small group, especially if the members are randomly assigned is a few people who are very engaged theologically and a few people who are not as aware of certain theological arguments. Let’s take for example, views on the Eucharist, or communion, or The Lord’s Supper (see what I mean?!). People in your group may have very strong opinions on transubstantiation, or the ability for the bread and wine to turn into Christ’s actual body and blood during communion. They may be adamant about their church’s tradition and their view on the theological divide and want to share their opinions with your group. Other people in your group may be thinking “transub-what?” and may not see what the big deal is. It is bound to happen at one point in time, but how do you work through it if you end up with a theological debate during many of your small group meetings in which some people are very engaged, but others are not?

Solution:

So, don’t panic. There are a lot of possible ways to diffuse this problem and ensure that people are all feeling included in group discussion. If many of the people in your group are concerned with discussing theological topics that others know little about, consider providing a little background information. Plan for the diversity and look up arguments that each camp holds. Explain them to your group first, and then discuss. This way everyone knows what is going on and people are not left feeling clueless. Another option would be to politely transition into another topic. If you see some people are feeling totally lost, try talking about something
else that they can relate to more easily. Encourage the people to discuss the topic at another time or during a different meeting after you have time to provide some background knowledge. Another option would be to go to people individually and talk to them. If you have one person in your group who is set on having a theological discussion every week while the rest of the group would like to talk about something different, go to that person and explain the situation. Ask them to help involve the other members of the group, and then see if they would like to meet one-on-one or plan a group meeting to talk about the topics they wish to discuss.

**Problem 2: We don’t agree and we will argue until one of us wins**

This problem is pretty self-explanatory. You might have people in your group who avidly disagree about a certain topic. What do you do when they spend ten minutes arguing back and forth about a topic while getting angrier and angrier with each other and causing tension in your group?

**Solution:**

My solution to this would be to diffuse some of the tension and transition into another topic. If the people arguing refuse to stop, recommend that they meet outside of the small group setting to discuss it farther. Also encourage your group members to realize that they will find people in life who completely disagree with them about something, but that doesn’t mean that they still can’t have healthy conversations. I would also encourage you to make process comments if you see things getting heated in your group. 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 understand that we all don’t agree, but we don’t have to yell at each other.” State what is happening in your group so that everyone can be aware and make it as productive as possible. Also, remember that some people are a lot more comfortable with conflict than others. What may not seem like a big argument to you, may seem like a really big deal to someone else in your group. Make sure that you are aware of the people in your group and their feeling during discussions. It is important to realize that even with differences, people can still have a supportive small group environment.

**Problem 3: I don’t really know what I think…**

It is possible that you might raise a question that someone else has never thought about before. But what do you do if everyone in your group looks at you with blank stares after you ask them for their stance on inerrancy religious pluralism, or sublapsarian eschatology? You can tell that they don’t know what to say or that they are avoiding eye contact.

**Solution:**

I hope that as a small group leader you know what conversation topics are appropriate for your small group setting and which are not. Some people are not ready to discuss these challenging topics. You have to be tuned into what your small group is ready and willing to talk about before throwing a question like that at everyone. So, if you don’t really know your group that well, maybe hold off on this for a while, but if you are feeling adventurous, make sure you know what you are talking about before throwing a question like that at them. Give them some
background knowledge, and then let them think about it. Do not force people to answer a question like this. It’s never a good idea.

**Problem 4: None of us agree, so let’s stop talking about it**

You bring up a topic that can be surrounded by some debate and the people in your group are hesitant to start talking about it because they do not want people to start arguing.

**Solution:**

I understand that this can be tricky to navigate. You don’t want to push people too far and end up arguing, but you also want to be able to talk about hard questions with your small group because they are a group of people who will support you and guide you when you are wrestling with a question. My advice is to be tactful. If you know something will become a cause of turbulence in your group, think twice before bringing it up, but if it will add to your discussion or seems like an important talk to have, don’t be afraid to broach those tricky questions. Give yourself prep time to look at all of the views so that you can frame and manage a healthy discussion. That way your group won’t get out of control and start arguing.

**Theological Resources:**

If you are looking to start up a theologically based discussion in your small group, or want to better understand different positions on a topic, here are some great resources that give some different perspectives for discussion.

- *Four Views on Christian Spirituality* by Bruce A. Demarest and Brad Nassif
- *Four Views of Christ* by Andrew Jukes and James Shiffer Kiefer
- *Four Views on Hell* by William Crockett and Stanley N. Gundry
- *Four Views on Free Will* by John Martin Fischer and Robert Kane
- *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* by Gary T. Meadors and Stanley N. Gundry
- *Across the Spectrum* by Gregory A. Boyd.
Dealing with Varied Expectations:

Here is another area where you might run into some differences. When people sign up to be part of a small group, they might have different ideas about exactly how it will work. Some people think that a small group is a place just to come and talk. They don’t expect a lot of structure, and they may not be serious about commitment. Other people may think that small groups are all about doing in-depth studying of the Bible with little discussion about personal experiences. Some people may be ready to dive into a really serious environment where they open up and share deeply and personally. Others may be uncomfortable with sharing on a personal level and expect to be able to sit and contribute little to the small group. And then there are expectations that you have. What are you supposed to do about this?

First, I would suggest starting your first meeting by sharing expectations and making a list. Set a goal to show that you are all going to strive for the same thing because if people come with different expectations, it is likely that someone will be disappointed in how the group is going. You can also avoid people not showing up or not being as committed to the group when you take the time to align everyone’s expectations.

Make sure that in this process you are truly listening to all of the group members to make sure that everyone’s needs are being met, then reevaluate your progress mid-semester or at the end of the year. Hold each other accountable.

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. I 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.
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**

So, one of your biggest responsibilities as a small group leader is to ask questions. But questions aren’t always easy and there are a ton of different kinds. Here are a few different types of questions, examples, and when you can use them. These question types come from *The Ultimate Road Trip* (1995) Try varying the types of questions you ask in order to promote the best discussion (p. 79-85).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question:</th>
<th>Use:</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Launching</strong></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>
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<td>an open question that helps to start discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Guiding or Clarifying</strong></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>
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<td>helps to explain or compare and contrast</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Follow-Up</strong></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>
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<tr>
<td>questions that draw the group into discussion after a member has expressed an opinion or answered a question</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Summarizing</strong></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>
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<tr>
<td>repeating what a verse or passage says to increase clarification</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Applying</strong></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>
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<tr>
<td>help group members to apply principles learned from a passage</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reverse</strong></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>
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<tr>
<td>reverts a question back to the person who asked it</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relay</strong></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>
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<tr>
<td>takes a question asked to the leader and relaying it to another member of the group.</td>
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</table>
Open vs. Closed vs. Limiting Questions

When you ask questions, it is also possible to ask open, closed, or limiting questions (The Ultimate Road Trip, 1995). 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 (The Ultimate Road Trip, 1995). 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 (The Ultimate Road Trip, 1995). 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 (The Ultimate Road Trip, 1995). 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**

So, 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. These categories came from *The Ultimate Road Trip* (1995) and I have added some of my suggestions to help you think about what issues you might face in your small group before they happen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>DO:</th>
<th>DON’T:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Dead silence</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. A wrong answer</td>
<td>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 (<em>The Ultimate Road Trip</em>, 1995).</td>
<td>Just skip over if it is a huge error. Just remember to be kind and understanding in your phrasing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Tons of distractions</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Lose your patience. If you get upset or angry, it will only increase those feelings in everyone else and make it worse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Difficult question</td>
<td>If someone asks you a question that you don’t know the answer to, tell them you don’t have all of the answers, but that you’ll look into it. Or ask them to research the answer and bring it back to the group next week.</td>
<td>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 (<em>The Ultimate Road Trip</em>, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. You can’t finish the lesson</td>
<td>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 (<em>The Ultimate Road Trip</em>, 1995).</td>
<td>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 (<em>The Ultimate Road Trip</em>, 1995).</td>
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<tr>
<td>People have other commitments too, and keeping them for an extra half-hour can cause tension.</td>
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</table>
| 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 (*The Ultimate Road Trip*, 1995). 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 (*The Ultimate Road Trip*, 1995).  
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 (*The Ultimate Road Trip*, 1995). |
| 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 (*The Ultimate Road Trip*, 1995). 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. |

One last thought on 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. I made some illustrations to demonstrate my point. 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.
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, I can’t include all 101 of these ideas in my 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

For as much as we say we want to build relationships, sometimes this can be the scariest part of a small group. We don’t always hit it off with all of the people in our group, and if you were placed together, you don’t always have a lot in common. Or maybe you are already best friends and have tons of things in common, but you are unable to take your relationship deeper and open up about things that do not revolve around hobbies and class schedules.

How do we measure such an unmeasurable concept?

You will find it really hard to measure a relationship. You can’t say that spending ten minutes more with a person will lead to a 30% increase in your friendship. If you did, people would probably look at you funny. But how do you measure a relationship then? I have been doing a lot of reading and a lot of thinking, and I have come up with five principles for building and improving relationships with your small group. These were influenced by Haden (2013) and his steps to building better relationships. I can’t say that following these principles will lead to a 75% increase in positive relationships in your small group, but I can say that these can help, so try them out.

1. **Don’t act like the boss** – This is important. You are the small group leader, and in a lot of ways you are in charge, but don’t have the attitude that you are better than your small group. Decisions should be made as a whole group and you should not try to hold your position over people. Don’t act like you are smarter than the people in your small group (even if you think you are) and don’t try to boss them around. No one likes that. No one.

2. **Show everyone that they are important to you and lift them up** – When people come to your small group, thank them for coming. Show them that they are important to you and that you care if they actually show up or not. Thank them for contributing answers or asking interesting questions. People like to feel appreciated. Let your group members know that you are thankful for them.

3. **Put yourself out there** – This is pretty self-explanatory. Share your ideas and your stories with your small group. Tell them things you are struggling with or need prayer for. They need to know that you are a real person too. Let them really get to know you. If you are an extrovert, this will be a little easier for you and you may have shrugged this point off already, but if you are an introvert, you can still do this. Tell your group that you are an introvert. Own it. You may have a lot of people in your group just like you. Open up and be honest, and people will open up too. Be authentic. Be imperfect. Be yourself.
4. **Be generous with your time** - If people in your group want to meet with you, spend time talking to them. Don’t be too busy to grab lunch or coffee with them in between classes. Sometimes you will have people who just need to talk and you can really foster a relationship by being available when they need you and not insisting that you can only meet from exactly 10:15 until 11:25. The members in your group may feel as though they are not important or that you only see them as another meeting.

5. **Listen and seek to understand others** – If you spend all of your time during your small group meeting talking about yourself or your ideas, you aren’t listening to what the members in your group need. It’s ok to talk, but make sure that you are also taking time to listen and try to really understand the members in your small group.

5 principles. Not very many, not very specific. My apologies, but I am sure you understand that every relationship is different. These apply to most people most of the time, so they are worth sharing, but there is no way to ensure that you will build a strong relationship with everyone in your small group. I can’t do it. I do hope that you take this advice and try it out. The most important thing to remember is to spend time with your small group. If you are not spending time with them, there is no way you will develop a relationship with any of them.

**Relationship Dynamics**

Remember the chart back on page 31:

I used this to illustrate healthy communication strategies, but I also want to point out that the second picture is also the way you want the relationships in your group to look like. It is unrealistic to think that you will develop a strong relationship with everyone in your group. I encourage you to get to know everyone in your group, but don’t expect to be best friends with everyone. It is also a lot of pressure to put on yourself if you think you need to constantly be meeting with every member of your group individually. The second model is more representative of what you should expect from the relationships in your group. Some people will become friends and meet up with each other. That’s great! Don’t feel left out and don’t try to be part of every group interaction. You don’t just want people to be friends with just you, you also want them to be friends with each other.
The Ultimate Goal

When we talk about building relationships, we again run into the hard-to-pinpoint goal. What do we ultimately want in our small groups? Well, in a way, we want your small group to move from a group of strangers to a group of friends. Pretty plain and simple. And you can focus on that by following the guidelines above. Meet with people. Meet during your small group time, meet individually, and meet for fun group activities. So what do you do with your group just for fun? Literally anything. Well, ok, not anything. Literally anything within reason. Less poetic, but a little more accurate. Fun time is important and this is where friendships really blossom, so here are a few ideas for fun.

At the beginning of your small group meeting:

Icebreakers!!! Icebreakers are the bread and butter of building relationships during small group meetings. You could play a game, ask a question, or do an activity. Whatever you want.

- Share Highs a Lows, I’ve also heard this called a weather report. Go around in a circle and tell what went well with your week, and what went terrible.

- Ask “friendship questions”. They are the questions people ask when they are first getting to know each other – go around in a circle – these are good for a first meeting.
  - Where did you live between the ages of 7 and 12?
  - How many siblings do you have?
  - Who was the person you felt closest to?

- What if questions – these help develop a little deeper of a relationship, but also don’t force people to share more than they want to – these are good for the second or third meeting.
  - If you could not fail, what would you do?
  - If you had one “re-do” in your life, what would you go back and do over?
  - If you could be doing anything you wanted in this moment, what would it be?
  - If you were on a desert island, what are the three things you would take with you?

- Deep Reflection questions – these require a little more knowledge of other group members, save these until you all really get to know each other.
  - 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 add to the group dynamic. Then go in a circle and read what each person listed for one person. Then continue on through everyone. This is super encouraging.
  - List which three emotions you feel the most often and explain why.
  - Pass a plate of different cookies around the circle (oreos, animal crackers, ect.) and ask people to pick the one that they think best represents them and why.
o Have people in your group write a fact about themselves on a piece of paper, and don’t have them write their name on it. Then collect them, and read them and have 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.

**Bonding activities outside of small group meetings:**

- Eat a meal together
- Make ice-cream, popcorn, or pizza
- Play a game – soccer, volleyball, Ping-Pong, boggle, whatever
- Go on a hike
- Have a crafting party
- Have prayer partners or accountability partners to meet with during the week
- Go sledding
- Swim in the breeches
- Make dessert together
- Watch a movie
- Go to a park
- 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.
- Do a team-building activity with the Loft Team
- Build a snowman or snow fort. A snowball fight it 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
- Build a gingerbread house together
- 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.
Additional Resources:


- This resource was mentioned above, however, I need to restate how many excellent ideas this book has. It covers icebreakers, conversation starters, and surveys as well as how to choose the content you are studying and tips on how to approach a small group setting.


- 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.


- This is a resource that details how to build better, successful relationships.
Now What?

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
APPENDIX

4-Mat Learning Styles Quiz

This quiz was based on Dan Lambert’s book *Teaching that Makes a Difference* (p. 85-87), written in 2004.

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