

training

1 Have no real idea what the group is for

"Well, it's somewhere to go on a Wednesday night." "We just gather together and see what the Lord does." "You have to have small groups, don't you - otherwise people just wouldn't see each other more than once a week!"

They've all been said, at different times by different people as 'reasons' for attending a small group. They're suitably vague, and sometimes dressed with a little superficial spirituality. Groups in some churches always seem to have been there, and the people who go to them always seem to have done. No-one can quite remember when they started, or why. They're just there.

The fact is, the group that has no raison d'être is at the mercy of its leaders. It can be turned into a self-indulgent plaything, it can be a law unto itself and not much more than a social gathering.

Whatever you call your group, it must have a function. Whether it's Bible study, discipleship, pastoral, prayerful, evangelistic,



training, social action, friendship, peer support or whatever, decide what it's for - preferably in a short sentence. And let its purpose dictate the way it works.

Jesus had a purpose for the disciples - he wanted to teach them to become 'fishers of men'.



training dynamic leaders for today's needs and tomorrow's challenges

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How not to lead your small group



Jesus specialised in spending time with people most in his society were uncomfortable with: prostitutes, publicans, 'sinners'. And he was ready to condemn the religious leaders as 'hypocrites'. Groups can be outward-looking, caring and welcoming.

RUSS BRAVO has led small groups, planned small groups, belonged to small groups and suffered them, too, over the past 20 years. Here are his top 10 no-nos for small group leaders ...



2 Don't plan a programme

Some groups think if they plan too much, they're liable to quench the Spirit. If they're methodical about a programme, it smacks too much of slick business methods - dampening the fiery sparks of spontaneity with the charcoal briquettes of legalism. So to speak.

The reality is that groups that don't plan end up being blown around from week to week by the moods and needs of its members. No structure, even if it's a loose one, means no direction - and very often, no progress.

It doesn't mean the group isn't able to change things just because they've been printed in a programme. Local circumstances and the unexpected can change things, but a planned programme gives continuity and stability - a firm base from which to move forward. Plan for spontaneity, then you can have both the fresh breeze of the Spirit and the solid rock of the Word.

Jesus taught by example. He took the disciples with him as he preached, taught and healed - then sent them out to do the same and report back to him. He planned, under the Father's guidance.

3 Don't review how you're doing

Some groups get so far, and no further. Why? Because they're afraid to be objective about how the group is doing. Sure, they have a pur-



pose and they plan programmes which are worked through. But they're unwilling to ask the hard questions: are we growing - numerically and spiritually? Are we being changed by our times together? Is there a greater love among the members which is being shared with those outside? Are group members maturing, using their gifts, growing closer to God?

The questions you need to ask will vary, depending on the nature of the group you lead. But you must ask them, otherwise your group will not remain sharp, fresh and alive to God's leading.

Continuous assessment is standard now in education and in the workplace - why should church be different? We should do it because we want to be effective in following Jesus - we want our lives to count. Groups that make a difference are not afraid to change.

Jesus tested his disciples, and reviewed their progress. "Who do you say that I am?" he asked them. Counselling, encouraging, challenging them, he wanted them to mature as followers.

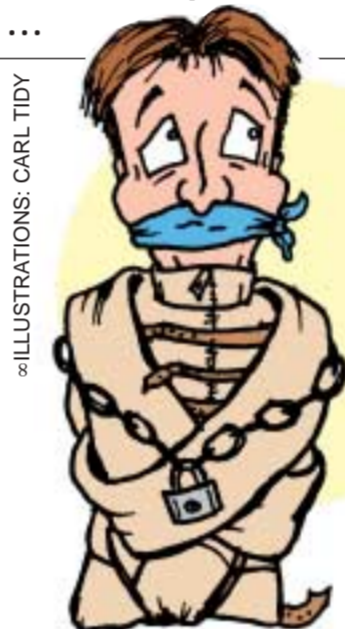


4 Training? Oh, you'll just pick it up

Many, if not most small group leaders end up taking on this most crucial role having had next to no training for it. Quite often, it is people who either have shown some pastoral gifts or Bible teaching gifts. Startlingly often, it's just people with the right size front room who don't mind disturbing the neighbours once a week.

Small group leadership is an imprecise art, and it can be learned. I make no apology for promoting the Small Group Leaders' training events *Christian Herald* is running in March this year with *Scripture Union* and *CPO*. For many, it will be the first specific training they have received (see coupon on this page). We hope it will be the start of an ongoing training programme that will help churches make the most of the small group format.

Jesus trained 'on the job'. He demonstrated what he meant, then got his disciples to do the same. He mentored them by example.



5 Keep it rigid and inflexible

Churches change. Leaders come and go. Local communities and nations change. But small groups trundle on, sometimes oblivious to all this.

It's fine having purpose-driven groups, planned and reviewing their progress - but they have to remain relevant to the changing world they are part of. What started out as a discipleship group for new Christians may evolve into a dynamic powerhouse of prayer and ministry to the local community. A Bible study group could end up spearheading a community project.

Don't fit your group into a straitjacket - it may well not fit in 18 months time.

Jesus maintained an intimate relationship with his Father, and responded to the needs he saw around him in the people that came to hear him. He was acutely aware of the timing of his ministry.

6 Make sure you're inward-looking

Many 'successful' groups end up stagnating because they got too cosy. It can happen when groups grow quickly and do not divide, so becoming unwieldy. "Oh, we couldn't bear to split because we all get on so

well", is a common comment. It's then that groups turn into 'bless-me' fellowships, where Christians gather for a jolly time praying for each other's dodgy knees while the world outside goes to Hell in a handcart.

Of course it's great when group members gel and care for and support one another. But every healthy group has to be outward-looking, whether it's in prayer, evangelism or social action. As Archbishop William Temple said, the Church is the only organisation formed for the benefit of those who are not yet members.

Jesus had compassion on the masses, who were lost and like sheep without a shepherd. Our groups are places to receive strength and support, but they should surely resemble army training camps more than hospital wings.



7 Allow the talkative to dominate, and make the quiet ones feel guilty

Bible study discussions can be easily hijacked by the extrovert members of the group, who don't mind giving everyone else their opinion, or who need little excuse to hold forth at length on their particular theological hobbyhorse. Good leaders will keep the talkative members in check, while helping quieter members or those younger in the faith to take part at their own level.

I've seen cases over the years where one dominant group member can actually put off several others from even coming at all. Not everyone will be able to lead the group in a discussion, study or activity, but a balance of ages, backgrounds and genders really helps create a healthy group.

Jesus knew his disciples' strengths and weaknesses, but loved them equally. He knew Peter would deny him, yet go on to lead the Early Church. Even Judas had a part in God's plan (John 13: 21-30).

8 Don't let hospitality get in the way of spirituality

Some group leaders seem to have come to the conclusion that the spiritual depth of their group is helped by uncomfortable chairs, freezing temperatures, tea as an afterthought and no biscuits. While of course you can go overboard - especially if your group is prone to No 6 above - but hospitality and welcoming surroundings do help!

Timing is also important. Some groups may work best meeting for an hour from 7-8am! Others, at a lunchtime, or the standard 8-10pm. The key is helping people feel at ease, and knowing where the parameters lie (ie if the hosts have to get up at 5.30am to get the train to work, make sure people understand you're not being mean making sure they're gone by 10pm!)

Jesus valued hospitality - see the Martha and Mary story, the wedding at Cana, and the invitation to tea with Zaccheus. He also thought physical needs were important too - hence the feeding of the 5,000. They weren't in danger of starvation, but they hadn't brought a packed lunch!

9 Discourage newcomers - they only spoil things

Settled groups sometimes seem to discourage newcomers, who find it hard to break into a cliquey gathering. Continuity is good, and there's nothing wrong with long-standing friendships, but if they make groups inflexible and unwilling to change and welcome newcomers, something's wrong. Change is here to stay, as they say.

10 Don't take any risks

The group that never made a mistake, never made anything. It's an old saying, but it holds true. Following Jesus is a wild adventure that can leave us hanging on by the skin of our teeth, yet so often we've turned it into a country ramble where nothing much is expected, and nothing much is demanded. If our groups get stuck in a safety-first rut, they need to be shaken out of it.

What did your group last do that would have been unthinkable but for members' faith in the living God?

Jesus was unconventional, radical and dangerous to be with. The disciples were thrown in at the deep end, and made plenty of mistakes. But they learned to live Jesus' way - and they helped turn the world upside down.

Your group could do the same.

Russ Bravo is editor of *Christian Herald*

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