

Going Deeper with your group

with John Wilks

Some resource material on the market for small groups is rather more demanding than the average. So how can you know when it's appropriate for your group? Church@home asked John Wilks, Director of Open Learning at the London School of Theology and an author of group studies.

Q: As a group leader, how can I identify when my group is ready to take Bible study to a deeper level?

A: The two key words here are 'trust' and 'confidence'. A group is ready to study at a deeper level if they trust God, the Bible and one another. So you can ask yourself these questions:

- Do the group members feel confident that they will not be ridiculed or looked down on by others if they admit that they have doubts about something?
- Are they sure that they can express their uncertainties and confusions about God and still feel secure in his love?
- Can they admit to having doubts about something in the Bible and not feel that they immediately undermine its authority and value in their lives?

If you find yourself answering 'yes' or 'probably' to these questions, then the group may well be ready.

Confidence, though, is not a matter of being certain that you already know the answers! Confidence is knowing that sometimes there aren't answers, or at least aren't easy or simplistic answers – but still being sure that we can still trust in God and the Bible despite everything.

Q: I don't want to risk splitting the group into an 'A' team and a 'B' team. What if some in the group want to go deeper, but others just don't seem ready?

A: This problem arises if we think that studying at a deeper level is all about knowledge; that the more we know, the deeper we can go. Of course, knowing more

about the Bible is important. I certainly hope that people know more as a result of attending a small group. But you might well find that people who don't think they are ready to go deeper are concerned that they might not know enough. I understand why people might think that, but I'm not sure it's correct.



Small group study is not meant to be some sort of exam! It is very easy for people to feel that they are being assessed, though, if not by the leader then by one another. So it's important to affirm people for their contributions, and to foster the idea that this is not a test. So I would encourage those who don't feel ready that going deeper is about maintaining trust in God in the face of tricky questions. It's about God's apparent unwillingness to heal everyone when we pray, not about knowing which Old Testament prophet preached to which king. Of course, there is a place for a group that is designed explicitly for increasing knowledge about the Bible. As a Bible College lecturer I'm hardly going to object to that! The *Deeper Encounter* series I've been writing for Scripture Union is to some extent demanding – not so much in terms of knowledge but in terms of grappling with some quite complex concepts. But the depth I'm encouraging in the series is not primarily intellectual.

Q: Have you any tips for delegating leadership in ways that help others in the group to mature as disciples?

A: No, I'm not sure I have! More seriously, it comes back to the issues of trust and confidence. People need to know that leading a group is not about having all the answers but much more about knowing how to encourage the timid and restrain the voluble. If a group makes the decision that everyone should have a go in turn then you'll be accepting that sometimes it won't be as good as other occasions. That's potentially asking a lot of everyone, but unless we try these things (see answer to the question after next) we'll never discover if we're good at it.

My tip? Gentle encouragement always does better than strong expectations.

Q: Should I be looking to deepen people's experience of fellowship and worship alongside deepening their Bible study experience? What if I don't personally feel equipped for this?

A: Yes, I think it's an excellent idea to include these aspects in the group's experience. By doing this we touch on our relationships with God – through worship, the Bible, through study – and with one another, through fellowship.

Feeling equipped for these two means very different things. To deepen a sense of fellowship probably means planning a variety of social events. Anything ranging from having an evening of nibbles and chat (with no study) to going to the theatre as a group would be excellent. Go to a restaurant, or have an evening playing games; quality fellowship is a lot about investing time, not about the intensity of the discussion. So deepening the group's experience of fellowship involves organisation. If you don't want to take that on – and there's no reason why you have to – then find someone else in the group who would love to do that planning.

Deepening the group's worship experience is another matter. On the one hand, it's certainly a great idea to incorporate worship on a fairly regular basis, but on the other I don't think we should beat ourselves up if we can't or don't want to. In my experience, a little goes a long way. Take singing, for instance, as just one aspect of worship. If your group lacks a guitarist, try singing along to a CD. It's a little odd at first, but we've even done that in my church when both pianists were unavailable. But whatever you do try, start small, and keep it small. By all means have a whole evening of music and prayer occasionally if you have the resources for that. Otherwise, concentrating on the prayerful response at the end will be more important.

Q: What's your advice about 'homework'? People seem to have such busy lives I feel reluctant to overload them, but I notice that when people have prepared for the session we all get so much more out of it.

A: My advice is to remember two aphorisms: 'You can lead a horse to water...' and 'Try it, try it, you will see!' (the latter from Dr Seuss' popular children's book *Green Eggs and Ham*). The best way to ruin your small group would be to insist on advance preparation by every group member; if people feel that you are forcing this on them then they will vote with their feet. It seems to me, therefore, that where the study material provides questions that you can photocopy, then the simplest thing is to suggest it. 'You don't know until you've tried,' is basically the approach to take with the group, while stressing it is optional. Offer the possibility of looking at the questions in advance. If the group already likes the study material then they will be more motivated to look at things in advance. Then the positive reinforcement of a great session becomes more motivation to prepare again, and again, and again.

Q: I've thought about trying to transition from a weekly group time to a more demanding fortnightly session that requires a bit of advance preparation time. What do you think of that as a strategy?

A: I see advantages and disadvantages. I have a slight phobia to the excessive strings of meetings that some churches create, so having fewer meetings often feels good automatically. A group that affirms their desire to do the preparation as often as possible might well like to experiment with that sort of a change (though I don't think reducing a fortnightly group to monthly is a good idea).

The disadvantage is that people will have less contact with one another. You need a sense of how important the group is to the social world of its members. Is this group a major source of personal contact for single people, whatever their age? They might not like the decreased frequency of meeting.

Q: Will tackling material that's a bit more demanding in the group mean that we feel a bit exclusive to newcomers? I wouldn't want that to happen. How can I avoid it?

A: Well, there are newcomers who are new to the faith, and newcomers who are new to

your church or group but not to the faith itself. For me, the mark of a good small group is that after most meetings I should know that I've had my complacency challenged, my anxieties soothed, and that God has been working in the lives of the group members. (I say 'most' rather than 'all' since the latter can build unrealistic expectations.) But I want my complacency challenged by the Spirit, not other group members! I suspect that newcomers will be attracted to any group where people are honest (not just about their successes but also their fears and concerns) and are uncritical of others, where the Bible is valued as an authority and guide no matter how difficult it might be to understand and apply, and the Lord is openly loved. Such a small group (and church) is going to grow: 'A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:34,35). Where that love expresses itself in trust and confidence then we will be attractive to newcomers.



John has written six studies in a series for confident small groups called Deeper Encounter, all [published by Scripture Union](#). Each booklet contains seven complete sessions plus CD audio tracks plus photocopiable worksheets. Already available are LOVE ONE ANOTHER (on John's letters and Gospel), PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE (exploring Romans 12), SLOW TO ANGER (looking at the character of God) and KNOWING CHRIST CRUCIFIED (examining scriptural images linked to the crucifixion). Two more titles come out next month: SERVE THE LORD (about Christian calling) and TOTAL FORGIVENESS.

More information including samples of the audio tracks is available at www.scriptureunion.org.uk/deeper

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