

# discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership  
Leader's Guide

## LEADING SMALL GROUPS

### LESSON 1: DYNAMICS OF GROUP DISCUSSION

#### INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Leading Small Groups. The purpose of these lessons is to equip the developing leader with skills and understanding in order to successfully lead a small group. A small group may be a Bible Study or Discipleship group, or any other small group used for discipleship and ministry. The focus is on building strong communication skills and positive relationships, accompanied by an attitude of love and service. Equipping yourself to be a better small group leader will enhance your ability to disciple and teach others, and at the same time, create a more enjoyable experience for everyone. This module is designed for those who are currently in church leadership, small group leadership, or a member of a small group. Hopefully members of a small group will one day take on leadership responsibility of such a group.

#### INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is emerging leaders who are preparing for specific ministry within the Church.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at [www.discipleshipessentials.org](http://www.discipleshipessentials.org).

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# LEADING SMALL GROUPS

## LESSON 1: DYNAMICS OF GROUP DISCUSSION

### PURPOSE

This lesson explores the principles of leading a group discussion, how to prepare for and lead a group discussion, and how to ask questions to stimulate discussion.

### LEADER'S NOTE

Have you had the experience of reading pages of a book, only to forget everything you just read? Or to be asked what a pastor spoke on last Sunday only to remember it vaguely? This is because we don't retain information from passive learning very well. On the other hand, you probably remember quite well the topic of the last discussion you had! Discussion is a very helpful method of teaching and exploring ideas. As we engage with others, discussion helps us clarify our own thoughts, see connections we never saw before and learn from our peers. Successful group discussion comes down to preparation – which is where this lesson can help. See how using the tips in this lesson will improve your group's conversation!

## INTRODUCTION

*Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.*

- ❖ What is one of your favourite topics to discuss?
- ❖ What can you learn from having a group discussion about a passage of the Bible that you cannot learn from just listening to a sermon?
- ❖ What are some factors that can make group discussion difficult?
- ❖ What small groups are you a part of? What have you learned from being a part of them?

## STUDY

*Instruct the group on the following points.*

### TEACH

- ❖ **The Purpose of Small Groups:** Many churches and ministries encourage believers to meet together in small groups for regular Bible Study and prayer, in addition to meeting together as a larger assembly on Sunday. In various settings these might be study groups, discipleship groups, new believer classes, or meeting together for some other purpose. Small groups are built on a certain amount of discussion, while classes and sermons are the best environment for lecturing



and passing on large amounts of information. Small groups offer the opportunity to ask questions, discuss and clarify ideas, engage in critical thinking, and share ministry experiences. Each participant is actively involved rather than being a passive listener in a church service.

- **Facilitation:** The role of a leader in a small group is different than a teacher in a classroom. While the leader might have done more homework on a topic than the others, he or she does not necessarily have the most knowledge in the room. Their role is to facilitate – or to help the group in meeting its objectives.
  - A Facilitator helps the group to establish goals and clarifies expectations.
  - A Facilitator does not exert control and power, but is more concerned with group participation and success.
  - A Facilitator develops a safe learning environment that protects minority views, draws on the experiences of the participants, referees disagreements, and helps the group to see connections between multiple viewpoints.
  - A Facilitator uses questions to encourage thinking, draw implications, and promote conclusions.
  
- Some of the benefits of meeting with other Christians in a small group are:
  - **Quality Fellowship:** When church assemblies grow to over 100 people, ability to know everyone well diminishes. People can easily feel left out, or lonely. Being a part of a small group (4-20 people) that meets regularly ensures quality fellowship.
  - **Going Deeper:** If we have questions about our faith, a small group is a much less intimidating place to learn. We can also go deeper into topics that are discussed in a smaller group of people.
  - **An Easy Invitation:** Some small groups have an open policy where members can invite interested individuals to join in at any point. It may be less intimidating to invite a friend curious about Christianity to a small group meeting in someone's home, rather than a larger gathering in a church service.
  
- ❖ **Dynamics of Group Discussion:** The quality of a small group is directly related to the quality of discussions they are able to have. Leading effective discussions takes preparation, practice, and keen observation of your participants. Discussions (by their nature) are unpredictable. If you have a specific outcome in mind, you may be quickly frustrated! While questions can help engage the learners with your lesson, new information should be welcomed and explored. Otherwise, the learning process will be stifled and they will not know how to apply these new truths.
  - Excellent group discussion requires the following:
    - **Safety:** Individuals should feel free to disagree, but do so politely. We must allow for people to not feel belittled or threatened by others who hold different views. If a leader shows honesty about their own life, participants will more likely be honest in their own responses. Creating an environment where individuals feel emotionally secure will produce fruitful discussion; otherwise, participants will give only the answers they think they are supposed to.



- o **Structure:** One person should be appointed to lead the discussion. They may pose the initial questions, as well as follow up when people give answers. They should have the authority to stop the discussion if it goes on too long or begins to get heated, and move on to the next item on the agenda. They may need to referee somewhat, to ensure only one person speaks at a time, and that each person who wants to answer is heard.
  - o **Purpose:** A time of discussion should have an end result in mind – either allowing people to share their personal experiences, to share what they see in the passage of the Bible, or to answer some application questions from a lesson. Keep the purpose clear when allowing time for discussion. This is not the place to ridicule people in the group, to tell your life story, or complain about your day. The leader of a discussion should bring people back to the purpose for which you have gathered.
- ❖ **Asking the Right Questions:** Putting a topic before a group of people will not naturally lead to fruitful discussion. This is where asking the right questions is so important! You should prepare these ahead of time. The right questions will allow your group members to discover the truths in the Bible for themselves, and make their own applications. As you learn to ask the right questions, watch how your participants become engaged and speak up!

➤ **Examine the chart below to see the three types of questions we can ask a group:**

Types of Questions	How it is Used	Example
<b>Closed</b>	<b>No discussion follows</b> -only one correct answer (sometimes yes or no) -useful to see if participants are following	-How old are you? -What does 2 Timothy 2:2 tell us is the one thing we should do? - What is the great commandment that Jesus gives us in Matthew 28:19?
<b>Partially Open</b>	<b>Little discussion follows</b> - answers don’t require much thought or synthesis of information - may be multiple answers but the answer doesn’t lead to further questions - answers may be right or wrong	-Where did you go today? - What are some of your daily habits? -Who were some of the people disciplined by the Apostle Paul?
<b>Open</b>	<b>Excellent for discussion</b> - there is no right or wrong answer -- each person may have a different response, and that’s okay - questions may include personal experience, opinion and implication	-Why do you think the Apostle Paul disciplined so many people? -How does this passage make you feel? -What are some of the struggles you face at home? - How can you apply this truth to your life?



- **Open Questions:** These questions are ideal for generating discussion. Generally, these are used after the facts of the passage or topic you are studying are established. There are several types of open questions, and they can be used in different situations:
  - **Personal** – this may be about past, present or future. The question may address personal history, attitudes or habits. For example, “When do you feel most worshipful?”
  - **Observation** – looks at what stands out to them in the text being studied, or what a passage says. For example, “What are some of the sins listed in this passage that are difficult to overcome?” Or, “What does Jesus chastise the Pharisees for?”
  - **Interpretation** – asks what it means in the context, or why it is there. For example, “Why did Paul write to the church in Corinth?”
  - **Application** – asks what I should do about this. “How should this passage change the way a person lives? “
  - **Extension** – these questions can be used to extend conversation in a particular direction. Questions could include the following: “Can you tell why you think that?” “What are the implications of that idea?” “If that is true, what should change about our behaviour?” “How does that make you feel?”
  
- **Setting up Discussion:** Closed questions are useful for checking to see that everyone understands a basic idea, or for introducing a topic. No discussion will follow these closed questions. Partially open and open questions allow for further discussion, especially when extension questions are added. Bringing in other voices to the discussion may be as simple as asking someone personally to give their opinion. You could say something like, “We have heard from Tom and Gavin, how would you answer that question, Mary?”

### TASK:

*Divide the group into small groups of 5-7. Have each group take one of the Bible passages below. The assignment to each group is to come up with at least 3 closed questions that could be posed about this passage, and at least 5 open questions that would stimulate discussion. Have them share their conclusions with the rest of the class. Take no more than 10 minutes for this activity.*

*Mark 4:35-41*

*Philippians 1*

*1 John 4:7-21*

*Matthew 5:1-14*

*Matthew 5:19-34*

*Romans 12*

*1 Corinthians 13*

*Genesis 1*

### TEACH:

- ❖ **The Right Environment:** In order to be very successful as a discussion leader, you will have to create the right environment for discussion to happen. You may have a group that makes discussion easy because they are all comfortable sharing their opinions – but that is an unusual situation!
  
- **Mistakes the Leader should Avoid:** As a discussion leader we must be careful not to make the following mistakes:



- o **Asking too Many Questions:** When we offer three or four questions at once about a topic, no one knows which one to answer. Ask one question at a time.
  - o **Not Leaving Time:** Some discussion leaders will ask a question, then pause briefly before answering it themselves. Some people will need time to think over a question.
  - o **Ignoring or Belittling Answers:** When you mock answers or are frustrated when people do not provide the answer you are looking for, they may be hesitant to give answers in the future. Be positive and encouraging!
  - o **Talking instead of Listening:** Discussion leaders should allow the group to interact with each other as they come up with answers. They can learn from one another rather than hearing only what you have to say.
  - o **Disregarding the Conclusions of the Group:** When summarizing a group discussion, the leader must always encourage the group itself to share their own conclusions based on what they have learned from one another.
- **Mistakes Made by the Participants:** Sometimes a discussion doesn't go well because of the participants involved. In order to maintain healthy discussion, you need to help participants who:
- o **Monopolize the Conversation:** Some people really love to talk and be heard. Discussion groups are not the place to listen to one person only! Suggest that someone else speaks, and if someone needs extra attention, suggest that the two of you meet at another time.
  - o **Are Reluctant to Participate:** Some people will never share personal information and are reluctant to answer. Sometimes it takes time and gentle encouragement. Each member of a discussion group should participate.
  - o **Are Argumentative:** Some people will argue with any opinion that differs from their own. They will need to be gently and lovingly corrected. Remind the group that this is not productive, nor is it loving behaviour.
  - o **Veering off Track:** Sometimes people will veer off on a tangent and begin talking about a new topic. A discussion leader must decide if this is fruitful or not, and if necessary, gently remind the group of their purpose and topic at hand.
- **Thinking in Circles:** A circle has no beginning or end, or any side that is more important. Think of your discussion group as a circle of equals. In order to set up a space that is ideal for group discussion, consider making the following accommodations:
- o Each person can see one another.
  - o The leader of the discussion is not elevated or separated from the group.
  - o People are able to sit comfortably, and not have to strain their neck or move their body to see others.
  - o The group is not too large (6-20 is ideal).
  - o If brainstorming or ideas are listed, record answers visually so all can see.



- ❖ **Conclusion:** There are many benefits of facilitating discussion time in group ministry settings, but because people are involved, there are challenges as well. Properly managed, a time of group discussion can be fruitful and enlightening.

### **TASK:**

*Hold a class discussion about the following question. If you have a particularly large class, you could break the class into smaller groups as you did earlier in the lesson.*

- What are the benefits of a discussion in a small group setting? What can be learned in discussion that cannot be learned by a different method?

## **DISCUSSION**

- ❖ What types of small groups can make use of discussion time? When is a discussion group not appropriate?
- ❖ When have you been a part of a discussion group that went poorly? What factors contributed to the lack of quality discussion?
- ❖ When have you been involved in an excellent small group discussion? Was it planned or spontaneous? What factors contributed to its success?
- ❖ When in a small group, do you tend towards monopolizing the conversation, keeping your opinions to yourself, being argumentative, or going off on tangents? How can you work on this?

## **PRAYER**

*Close the lesson in prayer. Ask that God would enable each participant to be gracious, patient and loving to his fellow group members. Pray that their discussions would be full of grace and truth as they share with each other. Pray that each participant would be encouraged and feel a sense of community with their fellow believers.*