

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study Guide

LEADING SMALL GROUPS

LESSON 4: FOSTERING HEALTHY SMALL GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

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.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.



LEADING SMALL GROUPS

LESSON 4: FOSTERING HEALTHY SMALL GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

The purpose of this lesson is to learn how to create a healthy small group by strengthening relationships, and providing tools to deal with interpersonal issues that may arise.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

Many churches will state that their small groups exist for the purpose of encouraging 'healthy relationships' among other things. But what does that mean exactly? How does a small group of people assigned to meet together build quality friendships? This lesson will give you some answers. The Bible tells us that 'iron sharpens iron' – meaning that people around us can help us become better people. This is the strength of small groups – but it can also be a weakness. Without 'give and take', relationships can be unhealthy and lead to conflict, fear, and loss of security in the group. The most important thing is that we carry one another's burdens and love each other. This will nurture a healthy group and help to accomplish the purposes for which it came together.

GETTING STARTED

1. Think about your best friends. What were the circumstances that formed these friendships? What continues to sustain them?

2. Do you welcome new relationships, or are you cautious with the people you befriend and share your inner life with? How could you benefit from a few more deep friendships?



STUDY

- ❖ **FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHERS:** There are some words that Christians use on a regular basis that might have a slightly different meaning than what is understood by the outside world. 'Fellowship' is one of these terms, but it is important that we understand it when we talk about Christian relationships.

- Read Acts 2:42 and identify the four things that the disciples devoted themselves to:

- Why do you think the disciples thought these four things were worth 'devoting' their lives to? The word 'devoted' suggests more than casual engagement; they were passionate about these things.

- What does fellowship mean to you? What would your life be like if you were devoted to fellowship?

True Christian fellowship is the cultivation of relationships in community. It is a unified group of Christians, perhaps from very different backgrounds, sharing something in common. It involves sharing experiences and emotions, carrying others' burdens, working together for common goals, and putting the welfare of the group before our own. Fellowship is cultivating friendships with the members of our church community, and treating them as if they were family. As a church body grows, it is difficult to maintain close relationships with everyone. Being part of a small group brings us into closer fellowship with part of the church congregation.

- ❖ **HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS:** A small group can be an enriching part of our spiritual life, but only if those relationships are healthy ones. We are more receptive to correction from one another when we know it is done in love. As we get to know people on a deeper level, we can learn from their experiences, as together we strive to follow the example of Jesus Christ.



- Read the following verses and write down what they say about healthy relationships:

Hebrews 10:24-25	
Proverbs 27:17	
James 5:16	
Galatians 6:10	
Colossians 3:11-13	

❖ **UNITY OF BELIEVERS:** A small group will be successful when the group genuinely enjoys one another's company. This unity and happy fellowship can be purposefully cultivated by the leader. Consider the ways in which the following can be part of a small group setting:

- **Shared Work:** Any activity or goal you have in common will bring the group closer together. Some ideas of shared work are:
 - Helping a mission or ministry (improving a building, sharing in their service)
 - Ministering to your community (visiting the sick or imprisoned, making meals, distributing clothing, caring for widows or elderly people)
 - Engaging with one another in planned evangelism
 - Memorizing a book of the Bible

- What does Hebrews 13:16 say about sharing work with one another?

- Can you think of other activities your small group could do together with the goal of helping others?

- **Adversity:** When we share in adversity, we feel closer to one another. If social or political forces make it difficult for Christians in your community, you are already facing adversity. There are other ways you can share in the adversity of fellow Christians:



- Praying for persecuted Christians around the world
- Sharing burdens and prayer requests with the rest of the group
- Providing practical help for members who are experiencing illness, or loss
- Supporting missions and ministries that care for the suffering

➤ Read James 1:2-4 and write down what you learn about sharing adversity.

➤ What other ways can you share in adversity together?

➤ **Celebration:** When we celebrate with one another, we connect through our joys. We should celebrate the lives, talents and blessings of each of the members in our group. Consider:

- Celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, births, graduations, etc. as a group
- Observing national or religious holidays together
- Sharing meals together on occasion – individuals can practise hospitality at their homes, or the meal could be shared as each person brings a dish
- Participating in a fun activity to get to know one another better!

➤ What does 1 Corinthians 10:31 say?

➤ What other ways could you celebrate together as a group?

➤ **Appreciation:** Each of us needs to feel appreciated, and we need that from those in our small group. It is important that we recognize one another and lift one another up with encouraging words.

- Thank one another for their contributions to the group.
- Recognize and encourage the gifts each has.
- Create opportunities to verbally share what each person appreciates about the others.



- The following verses are about appreciation and encouragement. What were the end results?

Acts 15:30-32	
1 Thessalonians 5:11	
Philippians 4:8	

- Who is someone you could encourage today or express appreciation to?

❖ **GIVE AND TAKE:** In all healthy relationships there is give and take. This should be an overall equal exchange – sometimes we talk and the other listens, but then we must listen while they talk. Sometimes they supply a need that we have, but later we will have opportunity to provide something for them.

- When someone is going through a difficult time and has increased needs, a healthy group is happy to give more during such times.
- We can become emotionally drained by people who take far more than they give. While we must love each other especially in difficult times, we should encourage balance in relationships when possible.
- A strong group will be characterized by healthy attitudes to one another, and expressions of trust and grace. For instance, members of a vibrant group will display the following behaviours:
 - o Be honest about what they think.
 - o Listen patiently to others.
 - o Share struggles and confess weakness and sin.
 - o Give and receive forgiveness.
 - o Receive correction without being defensive.
 - o Love others in practical ways, and welcome their love and concern for you.
 - o Submit to others.
 - o Demonstrate dependence on God.
 - o Be held accountable, keep others accountable.
 - o Take risks, try something new.



- When relationships are not balanced with give and take, they can turn unhealthy quickly. This may result in a group member becoming a source of stress, fear, or constant opposition. If this happens, it might be time for the group leader to step in and encourage a different behaviour.

❖ **COPING WITH UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS:** If someone is causing unhealthy relationships within your group, as the leader you have the responsibility to try to intervene. Remember that those exhibiting unhealthy behaviours need to be loved, and are likely hurting in other relationships as well.

- **Some Signs of Unhealthy Relationships:** Your goal is to help foster positive relationships where people can learn and grow in an environment that feels safe. When that safety is at risk, the group dynamic is disrupted. Watch for these signs:
 - Group members avoid one member.
 - Group members are reluctant to share their personal opinions and contribute ideas.
 - Group attendance is diminishing.
 - Group meetings seem to be about one person and their problems, rather than the purposes for which you originally began to meet.
 - Discussion times regularly become arguments and debates.

- What are some behaviors that can destroy trust in a group and make relationships difficult?

- **Counselling:** Sometimes it is necessary to confront the parties causing the unhealthy relationships. When it is clear that they take more than they contribute and are upsetting the group, it is best to meet with them privately.
 - Pray for them.
 - Confront the issue using questions rather than accusations.
 - Identify consequences of their behaviour.
 - Identify healthy limits.
 - Look for Biblical solutions to their problems.
 - In extreme cases, refer them to someone who has the training and skills to help them.
 - Support and encourage them when you see improvement in their behaviour.
- **Making the Hard Decision:** As the leader, you must be concerned with the health of the group as a whole as well as the individuals within it. However, when it is clear that the group can no longer function because of one individual, there may come a time when you must ask that person to leave the group. This should happen **ONLY** after attempts to accommodate, counsel, and support have failed, and it is clear they are



not willing to change. (For instance, if they continue to argue against the truth of the Bible and show no intention to change, it is no longer productive for them to attend your Bible Study.)

- ❖ **FEELING SECURE AND SIGNIFICANT:** In order for us to experience fellowship with other believers, we must feel secure and significant. This feeling will allow us to reveal our true selves and the issues we struggle with. It is easy to pretend sin is not a pervasive issue in our life when we are alone, but as soon as we meet regularly with others, our patience and willingness to love sacrificially is tested! A small group is an ideal place to grow in our Christlikeness and in our knowledge of God. Cultivating a healthy environment for this growth will produce much fruit!

IN SUMMARY

- ❖ Fellowship is an important part of our Christian life. True Christian fellowship is the cultivation of relationships in community.
- ❖ It is important for a small group to encourage healthy relationships. People bond together through various experiences, such as sharing work, adversity, celebration and appreciation.
- ❖ Good relationships have give and take. If someone never contributes but demands much from others, it can lead to unhealthy relationships
- ❖ As a group leader, we must monitor the health of the relationships in our group and, if necessary, counsel people in order to improve their relationships with others.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why should we be a part of a small group? What do we gain by learning alongside others that we cannot do alone?

2. What relationships in your life are leaning towards 'unhealthy'? What can you do to help them become healthy again? It is not always possible to fix every relationship, but prayer, patience, and love can help in many ways.