



# What Did I Sign Up for?

How to lead a successful discussion-driven Bible study  
by Mike Hurt

Large worship gatherings or a Sunday morning service may be the avenue that draws people to your church, but it's the relationships developed in small group settings that actually bind people together. Through those relationships and the studying of God's Word, lives are affirmed, sustained, and changed. Because of that, leading a small group Bible study is one of the most rewarding places of service within the church. As a leader, you will get the best of both worlds — the opportunity to lead and experience biblical community.

It's my hope that the following steps and tips can equip and inspire you to lead people to spiritual maturity through dynamic group experiences.

## **WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?**

### **How to prepare yourself mentally and spiritually to lead**

Leading a great discussion starts with you. Preparation is the key to ensuring that the group time is meaningful and worthwhile. Start with your mindset as you prepare for the study.

First, realize that you are preparing for a discussion not a lecture. Your goal should be to bring out other's stories and to help others learn rather than just not tell your stories and let everyone know what you have learned. I do this by studying with two perspectives in mind. First, I study to see what God teaches me. This is key because we are leading to learn not just leading for leadership's sake. It's also essential that the group sees that I am applying God's Word to my life as I lead. In fact, my example as a leader is the example that others will follow. If I am diligent in my application, my group will follow suit. If I am lukewarm in my application, my group will be also. Remember to be honest about past and current struggles you're experiencing in your relationship with Christ. This encourages openness and builds trust within the group.

After I see what God has for me through the study, I look at it again and ask what God might have for individual group members. I pray and ask God to give me wisdom in this. Sometimes, when I know that someone needs to grow in a particular area, I may even write their name next to the question as a reminder to personally challenge them. This challenge may come in the form of a question during the study, or it may come in the form of a conversation outside of the group.



## CHARTING THE COURSE

### How to develop a discussion plan that works

The next step in preparing for a great discussion is to develop a discussion plan. This involves a few things: preparing a place for the study, planning your time, and choosing the questions that will guide your group through a meaningful discussion.

#### 1. ENVIRONMENT MATTERS.

Preparing a place for the study is an essential first step. Your group's meeting place will, in some ways, determine the intimacy level that your group reaches. Most groups succeed in places that are warm and inviting. If you are meeting in a home, then it is easy to prepare this type of a place. Your goal should be to remove as many distractions as possible, such as turning off phones, checking the room temperature, and talking to roommates or others about not interrupting the group time.

If you aren't able to meet in a home, then your goal is to make the room as "warm" as possible. Put the chairs in a circle rather than a lecture setting. Bringing snacks and drinks quickly warms up a room and encourages people to talk and interact with one another. You may also want to consider bringing different lights into the room. Fluorescent lighting has a cold, institutional feel. A floor lamp or two can make a big difference adding warmth and a sense of home.

#### 2. PLAN TIME INTENTIONALLY.

Next you need to determine how you will use your time. Before I share with you a timeline for a "normal" group, let me remind you that no one wants to be in a normal groups. So get creative! Change things up. Move things around. Give yourself permission to lead. With that said, here is a good framework from which you can get creative. I like to have relationship building or hangout time as a part of every (yes, every) study. Dedicate at least 15 to 20 minutes of your group time to this. This communicates a couple of things — that the relationships in the group matter and should be developed often, and it reminds the group that this is more than a Bible study — it's a group that exists to study the Bible and do life together.

After hangout time, transition to the study. I like to dedicate 45 to 60 minutes for a great time of discussion and learning. This allows plenty of time for everyone to be a part of the discussion. It also keeps me from lecturing. If I'm pressed for time and have great content, I will talk too much to ensure that every point gets covered. After the study time, it's time to transition to prayer. This time should include both prayer requests and praying together. It's through this prayer time that your group will grow in intimacy and you will communicate that God is the only solution to the needs of your day.

If you consistently get to the end of your time together and don't have time to pray, that's a problem. But it doesn't have to be. Rather than pressing through the content and skipping prayer time, stick with your planned timeline and transition to prayer based on your schedule instead of where you are with the content. This way, you pray and are already prepared for next week's study. That's a "win-win" situation.

#### TIME KEEPS TICKIN' AWAY: QUICK-REFERENCE SCHEDULE GUIDE

Knowing the best way to plan your time is a challenge and depends a great deal on the amount of time allotted for your group to meet. The following breakdown is a good model to follow:





### 3. GOOD QUESTIONS ARE THE KEY.

Now it's time to decide on the questions you'll use to guide your group through a meaningful discussion. The first lesson here is to realize that no curriculum is perfect for your group. You'll need to ignore some questions, edit others, and create your own to make the study fit your group. The second lesson here is to choose the right type of questions.

Every study should include questions that engage the group with each other and with the topic of the session.

Many times, these are called "icebreakers" which allow you, as a leader, to begin to focus your group on the topic. **Icebreakers** also allow for you to be creative and engage different learning styles in natural, non-cheesy ways.

The next type of question that you need to include are **encounter questions** where your group encounters God's Word and each other through study. This is where classic — observation and interpretation — Bible study questions should be asked. It's through encounter questions that your group will discover what God's Word says and means. Two of the biggest things to avoid with these types of questions are closed-end questions and "check your brain at the door" questions. Closed questions are questions that can be answered with simply a "yes" or a "no." They have a clear right or wrong answer. Remember, you are leading a discussion not just looking to get the right answer. "Check your brain at the door questions" are questions that ask for obvious answers and require zero thought. These questions don't spur growth. As a leader, you should inspire growth to maturity. This will not happen if we ask easy to answer, "yes or no" questions.

Along with the encounter questions, you need to ask **application questions** that answer the "so what?" of the passage. Application questions can center on actions we need to take, examples we should follow, or attitudes we should adapt. The key is that these questions lead to action. Prioritize application in your small group, and you will see people grow in ways like they never have before.

### 4. PRAY.

There is one last and extremely important step — pray. Take some time and pray that God will work in the hearts and minds of your group. Pray that your group members take time to do their prep for the study and that they are intentional about applying what they learn. Pray that nothing distracts them or keeps them from being a part of the group. Pray that your group members build loving, authentic relationships. Lastly, pray that God would be honored by you as a leader. When I pray for my group, I like to picture the group sitting together in the room where we meet. Since I know where everyone usually sits, this exercise reminds me to intentionally pray for each person.



### PRAYER PRACTICES

As you plan your prayer time each week, avoid leading your group into a prayer rut by varying the way you pray together. Consider these meaningful prayer ideas to mix it up:

- ① Simplify your prayer time using sentence prayers. Lead your group to pray through various areas of their lives such as school, relationships, work, church, etc., by asking them to pray one sentence after they are prompted by you.
- ① Personalize your prayer time by forming prayer groups. Divide your group into groups of three and have them share their requests and pray for each other. This allows more time to share requests and more time for prayer together.
- ① Remember God's activity in your group's life by keeping a group prayer journal (consider keeping this online as well to review throughout the week and allow group members to post requests between group meeting times).
- ① Every few months, dedicate your meeting time to review and remember all that God has done in your lives. To help with this, my groups have built modern day Ebenezers (stones of remembrance) using Legos®. Simply write a one or two word praise to God on the side of the Lego®, and add it to others in the group. Before you know it, you will have built a tangible reminder of God's activity.



## CONVERSATION THREADS

### How to handle conversation hogs and rabbit chasers

Group meeting time is here. With your group plan in hand, your goal as a leader will be to engage everyone in the study. Some people in the group will need you to draw them out; others will need you to remind them that others in the group have things to say, too. What can you do to balance each of these extremes? Give the person who doesn't talk time. Odds are they are figuring out if they can trust the group before they engage in the conversation. You may want to talk to them outside of group time and ask them how you can help them join the conversation safely. Get their permission to ask them direct questions during your group time. With these boundaries established, odds are even the shyest person will engage in the discussion.

Then there is the person who talks too much. Don't be afraid to directly confront this in the group by gently cutting them off saying something like, "Thanks for sharing Mike. Does someone else have something to share?" Don't wait for them to stop. It will kill the group. No one wants to be a part of a group where one person dominates the conversation. If the pattern continues, you will need to talk to them one-on-one. Let them know that they are dominating the group time and that you need their help to engage the rest of the group.

Sometimes you will need to redirect the whole group not just one member. This happens when the group begins to chase rabbits that pull you away from the focus of the discussion. Be sensitive to this, because God may be redesigning the time before your eyes. A good rule of thumb? Allow them to chase rabbits that lead you to a place where people are talking about God's activity in their lives or places where people feel challenged by God to take new steps of faith. If your rabbit trails lead you to places other than this, you need to call the group back to the focus of the study.

## IT'S NEVER REALLY OVER

### How to connect between group sessions

The difference between a small group and a Bible study is what happens after the group meeting ends. As a leader, your responsibilities don't end when the group meeting is over. What's left to do?

1.

Lead your group to build close relationships with one another. This is done best by doing what you love to do together. For some groups, that may mean sports. For others, it may mean meals out and movies. There is no formula for relationship building, so the best thing you can do is create an environment that allows and encourages people to connect. Trust me. If you create the right environment, your group will figure out how they can do life together. Time and time again, I have seen God bring a group of strangers together in such a way that they are not strangers anymore. They become like family for one another.

2.

Once relationships are established, you should lead your group to serve together. As you look for ways to serve, remember to serve both in the church and in the community. As your group serves together, cool things will happen. Some members of your group will thrive and will find their place of service for years to come. Others will struggle with being a servant. This will clue you in to ways you can challenge them in the future. Either way, you learn more about your group, they know more about each other, and you meet needs and share God's love along the way.


3.

Help people keep the commitments they make during the group study time. This is the truest form of accountability you will ever experience. God convicts people in the context of community. Then, you as a leader come along side them and reinforce God's activity in their lives. If they are taking action on their commitment, then you get to encourage them. If they are not, you get to challenge them. This is done best in the context of a one-on-one conversation. Make it your pattern to connect personally with members of your group to talk through their spiritual development.



# Laying the Groundwork

## Start a Group Strong by Answering Why? Who? and What? First



One of the first questions you will answer as your group begins to meet is why the group exists. This is a great conversation to have because you'll discover the expectations people have as they describe why they need a group. As a leader, you can reinforce their expectations or even redirect their expectations when appropriate, so that your group starts with a common understanding of why the group exists. Many groups form a group covenant as a part of this conversation. A covenant is a document that answers two questions: 1. What do you hope to get out of the group? and 2. What commitments are required for us to get what we want and need out of the group? Keep it simple, but make sure to cover issues like: attendance, preparation, confidentiality, etc. (Find tips for developing a covenant at [www.threadsmedia.com/lead](http://www.threadsmedia.com/lead).)

After you answer the "why" questions, you will turn to the "who" questions. "Who" questions center on how many people should be in the group and the group make-up itself. I have found groups of 10 to 12 people tend to work best with 12 being the max and six being minimum. With more than 12, group members never get to talk; less than six, and there aren't enough options for individuals to talk to. Once you know how many people you're going to have in the group, decide who should be a part of the group.

This is where you need to think through if the group is for couples, men only, women only, or a blend of all three. (Note: I prefer gender-based groups, meaning guys meet with only guys, women meet with only women, or couples meet with other couples because of the intimacy level that can be developed in the groups. People need a place to be real, and I believe these targeted groups provide the best environment for this. You will need to determine what works best for the structure of your ministry and the individuals in your groups.)

Once you know why and who, you will need to choose "what" you will study. There are three things you need to remember when choosing a study: studies should be relational in nature, doctrinally accurate, and application oriented. Looking for these three qualities in your resources will ensure that your group is growing together as a result of the study.

### WANT MORE?

For more tips, helps, and ideas on leading a small group Bible study, go to [www.threadsmedia.com/lead](http://www.threadsmedia.com/lead).

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