

# STARTING AND LEADING A SMALL GROUP

by Rad Zdero

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A friend once asked me how to start a “small group” and if I had any suggestions. I responded by saying that it depended on what they wanted to accomplish. The following are a few key issues to consider, whether the small group is affiliated with a traditional church structure or whether it is an autonomous house church linked with a relational network of house churches.

**The first question I would ask is, are there 2 or 3 other people I know that share the same vision and desire to connect and build a ‘Jesus’ community?**

The only way we can find out is if we ask a couple of people, perhaps a couple of Christian friends or neighbours that we think might be interested, share our vision and passion and see if they feel the same. This thing works best in a Team context. It should not revolve around one person necessarily, but it might in the beginning stages. Perhaps it may start only with us and one or two friends. That’s fine. We don’t have to have 20 people there at the first meeting, or the second, or the third. As we run into new people, or someone comes to mind, and have some experience in it over a few weeks or months, we’ll know what exactly we’re inviting new friends to.

**Second, is the group meant as a ‘community’ for professing Christians, for self-described non-Christians or for both?**

From my own experience, we can build a community where Christians and non-Christian people feel comfortable, a part of things, where they can contribute and have a place. It doesn’t have to be mutually exclusive, either a “prayer” group or an “outreach”. I think they can be part of the same thing where everyone is being challenged to grow closer to each other, to understand themselves more and deepen their sense of God.

**The third thing is to start small, go slow, go deep and God will give the increase.**

Let's not worry about the masses at the moment because, very likely, they won't fit into our living room anyway. Start with a few. Remember Jesus really only had 12 into whom he invested heavily, so build into that group of people and let them build into us, be open, honest, caring, get to know each other. Pray. Whatever might help us connect. Socialize. Don't rush. Be patient, but at the same time be intentional. Don't expect that everyone will be as eager as we are all the time. Don't be too disappointed if people miss stuff at times, etc. I would tend to keep it very simple at first, but that's me. Maybe choose a book or discussion sheets or book in the Bible or maybe it's a prayer group. I would tend to focus and know what we're about in the group. Go deep. Connect with people deeply, as appropriately and comfortably as possible. Get to know each other. Be open to new people – that's one of the ways we met and had new people come in - and friends. Ensure permeable boundaries for the group.

The fourth suggestion is that the group owns the group. As things start moving along, allow different people to lead different things, organize, etc. There may be one or two strong leaders in the midst whom people tend to look to for direction and putting things into place. That's okay, because it is biblical and a practical necessity. However, the whole group benefits when different gifts and talents and opportunities to lead can be taken by others too. Let everyone feel and know and have the opportunity to take ownership for the group itself.

**The fifth thing is spontaneity.**

Let's always be open, aware of opportunities, let people's creativity have a chance to come out if they suggest ideas or want to try something or invite someone or lead something or whatever. This kind of stuff doesn't need to be too centralized or controlled. Whenever one tries to overly control the group, I think people begin to feel oppressed.

**The sixth ingredient is that group size should not be too small or too big.**

In my experience, groups between 5 and 15 people work best. Fewer than 5 people will increase the intimacy level, but the number of relationships, skills, and abilities will be far less. More than 15 people will do the opposite thing by decreasing the intimacy, but increasing the number of resources the group has. Although there is no formula, modern sociologists suggest that around 8 people is the best size for optimal small group dynamics to occur. The fact that Jesus primarily mentored the 12 disciples in his small group should not escape our notice.

**The seventh issue is to network your small group with other small groups.**

Keep on the look-out for other small groups, whether they are Christian house churches or church-based cell groups. Get to know them. Bring your groups together from time to time. Do some purely social things. Have some 'worship' times. Volunteer for community service projects together. Small groups must be linked into larger networks in order to survive and thrive over the long term. Just as isolated cells from a living being will eventually die without the support of other cells, so it is with small groups.

**The eighth element is to have a healthy outward focus.**

Nothing is more boring, irrelevant, and irritating than a small group that is only focused on its own needs. Now, our own needs are very important. We need to keep learning and growing too. But, as a Christ-centered small group, we can also be used by God to make a big difference to others. We can volunteer at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. We can hand out Bibles on the street corner. We can organize a canned food collection for the community food bank. We can adopt a nation or ministry and commit to praying for it and donating our finances to it. There are a million and one things that we could do. So, let's pray and ask what God might have in store.

**The ninth thing is that prayer is the most important thing we can do,** but perhaps most difficult things in the whole endeavour. By prayer, I don't mean giving God the same old laundry list of things we would like him to do for us and for our group. Rather, by prayer, I mean that we take time out to quiet ourselves and listen to what God may want to say to us as we think, observe, and study the Word. This should permeate the group from beginning to end and from top to bottom.

Finally, let me give just one practical example of how this has worked in that past for me practically. There were about 6-7 Christians in one of the many groups I have started over the years. Some were older and some very young, only recently within the year having made some commitment,

and a couple of non-Christians (who were quite open) hanging around too, either just for more social occasions, but also coming to the “group times”. Part of it was the material we material we used as a launching pad for discussion and learning. We used stand alone discussion sheets (one sheet per meeting) with song lyrics from mainstream pop and rock songs, with cartoons, and quotes from theologians, philosophers, writers, artists, politicians, and of course the Bible. Each sheet focused on one topic, e.g. “Why Forgive?”, “Why does God allow suffering?”, “Why do/don’t people believe in God?”, “How can I know myself?”, “Can I question God?”, etc. The rest of our group was built around relationships, so there was a trust there between people. We’d hang out, watch movies, eat dinner, have our meetings, call each other during the week, celebrate each other’s birthdays, pray for each other, talk about spiritual things at a coffee shop, etc. Another small group I was involved in started a homeless shelter and organized the first-ever fundraiser/walk for the homeless in that town. We were trying to build a “community” just as Jesus did. And people in the small group grew in their faith and others outside the group were impacted.