



**LEADING
SMALL GROUPS
AT CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION**

- PASTOR JUSTIN SCHOOLCRAFT -

WELCOME

Hello!

The Adult Discipleship team is glad you are here. We are excited that you have expressed interest in becoming a small group leader – such a step is not taken lightly, and we thank you for this move towards leadership.

“Small groups” have become so commonplace in contemporary churches that many of us have taken for granted their significance. We forget that the Christian faith is best lived in relationship with other believers, and that these relationships have the power to change us. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, believed that God is uniquely at work in Christians’ lives through intentional, faithful conversations in small group settings. He even referred to “Christian conferencing” as a means of grace – meaning that God gives us the grace needed for growth and maturity through these conversations. Despite how commonplace small groups have become in churches, then, what is not commonplace is their power. We may hear the message of the Gospel at church, but small groups empower us through group dialogue to become that message for the world.

We try to enact this vision for Christian growth through our small groups here at Resurrection.

Resurrection small groups are communities of 5-15 people who meet regularly on the journey of becoming deeply committed Christians. The word “becoming” is especially important to us. We try to create opportunities in our small groups for people to become deeply committed Christians - to *become* the message we preach. This journey of becoming is never over; it is always deepening, always growing.

You likely recognize within that definition the influence of Resurrection’s purpose statement, “to build a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians.” Our vision and mission for small groups ministry happens within the context of this purpose statement. Growing as a Christian through small groups ministry at Resurrection happens alongside the life of the collective Church and what God is doing through us to make our communities look more like the Kingdom of God. We believe small groups is a part of this purpose.

What we also recognize is that healthy small groups are cultivated when both leaders and participants commit to quality group practices. God is the one behind the spiritual growth that occurs in small groups, but God also works with leaders and participants to facilitate that growth. God wants to use you – yes, you! – to lead people on this journey of growth alongside other people so that we are living into our purpose. But other people can be tricky! There are personalities at play, group dynamics at work, and patterns of sharing that can be challenging to wrangle. Behind all that trickiness, though, is the living God at work in a group.

This document exists to introduce you to 8 best practices for leading a small group. It is intended to be practical, and thus, examples abound. As you read, our hope is that it fills in some of the gaps when it comes to actually facilitating the discussion in your group, a sort of one-stop resource for managing conversation, personalities, and group dynamics. It is a reference for you to come back to over and over rather than a list for you to memorize.

As you prepare, lead, or develop your group, you are always welcome to reach out to me at justin.schoolcraft@cor.org. You are covered in prayer as you begin this journey. Perhaps John Wesley's final words spoken before his death say it best – "Best of all, God is with us."

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

It may seem trivial to say. You may be ready to jump at the details, review the plans, and master the skills. But before you proceed in becoming a small group leader, let me ask you an important question: Are you attending to your relationship with God?

That relationship is the most important thing. In my experience as a pastor, I can tell you there is nothing more important when it comes to leading a community of faith than attending to your own relationship with God. The same is true for you as a small group leader.

We can think of that relationship is a plant in the ground. Are you watering its roots? Are you guarding against weeds, and pruning unhealthy stems? Your relationship with God doesn't have to feel perfect. All of us encounter real seasons of darkness and storms, and God does not demand shallow happiness or warm and fuzzy affections when times are hard. Feelings come and go through seasons, some good, some hard. What can remain constant through all of it is the act of attending to that relationship – like watering a plant.

When we stop watering that plant, it withers. My personal belief is that for most of us, when we stop watering our spiritual roots, we fall into habits of going through the motions of religion without allowing the Holy Spirit to fill us, energize us, and send us out for ministry. Many of us get to that point without even realizing it. But the good news is that when withering happens, God has the power to revive our “plant” every time.

Here's why it's important. When you lead a small group, people will share their personal struggles with you. They will see you as a model of faith. This comes with a degree of responsibility. The expectation is not for you to be a super-Christian. Instead, the hope is only that you are watering your roots. If you are, you'll find that God's Spirit gives you the strength to respond gracefully when someone in your group says something that irritates you, to listen patiently even when you are exhausted, and to lead with confidence even if you feel insignificant.

So, this is the question to grapple with at the start: “Are you attending to your relationship with God?” At Resurrection we talk about the “Five Essential Practices” – worship, study, serve, give, and share. Are these practices part of your life? They go a long way towards cultivating that relationship.

THE SMALL GROUP JOURNEY

Your leadership or participation in a small group is only one part of the Christian journey. While small groups are vital for one's growth and development in the Christian life, they are not a replacement for worship, personal study and devotion, acts of service, or other components of the Christian walk. Instead, they are just one part of your journey of "becoming."

In a similar vein, I mentioned above that small group ministry at Resurrection occurs within the larger Church's purpose. What that means for us in Adult Discipleship is that our ministries ought to shape and form deeply committed Christians to participate fully in the life of the Church, particularly through the Five Essential Practices of worship, study, serve, give, and share. Therefore, the long-term vision for small groups is one of gradual maturation in the Christian faith. John Wesley called this growth process sanctification, and it entails a journey into deeper devotion to God on the one hand, and corporate service to our neighbors on the other.

This ministry, then, will not succeed if it keeps people where they are. We want to encourage people to grow, simply stated. We therefore wish for groups to embark on a journey that begins in a structured manner, and then to move forward into the years ahead in a self-guided, deeper manner. This journey comes from a sense that groups that start and continue indefinitely without true growth miss the mark. We want to affirm the goodness of forming intimate community with the people in your group while also balancing our call to keep growing and evolving. Here is the journey we envision:



Stage 1

Your group, over the course of one year, completes the small group journal for Year One. This journal has two major goals in mind when it comes to formation in the Christian faith: a commitment to learning how to serve your fellow small group members well, and the cultivation of a deep awareness of your personal story.

Stage 2

Your group, also over the course of one year, completes the small group journal for Year Two. This second journal, like the first, has two major formational goals in mind: the development of a deep life of personal devotion, and the sharing of your faith through mentorship.

Stage 3

Ultimately, our desire is that through your participation in a small group, you might come to respond to God's call on your life to disciple others. If your journey is one of "becoming" – of continued growth in God's love – that road will lead you towards discipling other people. Our prayer is that your time in a small group will equip you to say "yes" to that call, and you could do so in a couple of ways:

Option 1: You and/or other members of your small group choose to be small group leaders for a new round of group launch. In doing so, you would be moving to a deeper level of Christian service and leadership.

Option 2: You and/or other members of your small group choose to **participate** in a new small group at the next group launch.

Option 3: A small number of people within your current small group choose to continue meeting in an intentional manner for Christian discussion based on the practice of John Wesley. The Year 2 journal will train you how to do this, and you could retain this practice as a group for as long as you'd like.

Option 4: You do 2 or more of these options!

Our hoped-for outcome is that many groups will choose option 3 listed above after finishing their second year. John Wesley called this intentional form of group meeting the "band meeting." It would entail forming smaller groups from within your small group to create opportunities for deeper authenticity and sharing over your life of faith. Adult Discipleship will equip you to meet in this fashion when you get to that point.

We believe this model keeps us accountable to our call to always grow and mature. As we form close bonds with our groups and the community around us, we hold in tension the gift of steady community on the one hand, and the opportunity to constantly seek what God has for us next on the other hand.

Learn more about the small group journey at groups.cor.org.

8 KEYS FOR LEADING YOUR SMALL GROUP

KEYS FOR FACILITATING DISCUSSION

1. CATCH THE WORDS

Bottom Line: *meaningfully respond to every comment, even if brief.*

Oftentimes as leaders we are tempted to keep the responses flowing. However, when one person speaks up and no one acknowledges that they spoke up, the whole group can feel like they will be ignored if they speak up, and conversation will be stifled as a result. Words are vulnerable. Think of someone's words that are spoken in the group like an egg that they hold out and then toss. When you as a leader respond, even if briefly, to the words they shared, you "catch" that egg. It makes them feel safe, and now the whole group trusts you to catch their words without letting them drop and splatter. When words are not "caught," the group now feels unsafe. In their minds, they usually feel like this: "If I toss out my words, maybe they won't be caught. It will hurt to see them splatter." You can help your group by catching their words.

Examples: After someone talks, say, "Thank you for sharing that;" "I appreciate you speaking up;" "That sounds difficult;" "That's a really good observation." Catch every comment!

See a live example at <https://groups.cor.org/resources/>



2. REFLECT WHAT YOU HEAR

Bottom Line: *An excellent response to someone's comment can be as simple as reflecting back what you just heard them say.*

One of the best gifts you as a leader can give to someone in your group is the opportunity to help them see themselves. Have you ever seen a video recording of yourself? Or an audio recording? If so, you understand that there are all kinds of things about ourselves we don't notice because we rarely have the chance to see them. When we see good things in ourselves, it makes us feel self-confident, and it calls attention to the good work God is doing in our life. When we see growth areas, it may be challenging, but you'll likely feel thankful that someone helped you notice it. Through your group facilitation, you can play a role in helping someone see themselves. We call this "reflecting." It holds up a mirror, which prompts growth. Reflecting what someone just spoke is also helpful in that it "catches"

8 KEYS FOR LEADING YOUR SMALL GROUP

their words and serves as an easy response. Don't know what to say after someone speaks? Reflect their words back! Here are some examples for how to reflect. In all of them, you are trying to restate what was said, understand the emotion that came out, and show your support.

Examples: (think about how these responses "hold up a mirror")

- "It seems like you feel __ about __."
- "I can see why you feel __ about __."
- "So __ happened yesterday? That sounds like it would be hard."
- "I can feel that you might be stressed even as you talk about that. Would you like to say more?"
- "You did __ for __? That is extremely kind of you!"
- "I can always tell from your responses how compassionate you are for others."
- "Thanks for sharing that. I think I speak on behalf of the group when I say __ is a spiritual gift of yours."
- "I sense that you are getting frustrated about __. Would you like to connect about that after group?"

See a live example at <https://groups.cor.org/resources/>



3. BE DIRECTIVE AT FIRST, THEN CULTIVATE OWNERSHIP

Bottom Line 1: *Groups are dependent on structure in their early stages. Be gently assertive at first in leading your group through the flow of your time together.*

Healthy, God-oriented sharing and discussion in a group setting is entirely dependent on an environment that feels safe, and to a degree, predictable (though some unpredictability and spontaneity is unavoidable). It is our human nature to feel stress when we are caught off guard. As you get started, a reliable structure is valuable to the maturation of your group. Leaders can live into this healthy practice by being gently assertive to move the group through the planned material or activities. This includes nudging reserved people to speak, as well. If your group senses that there is no control, or that the conversation is aimlessly drifting, they will shut down. They will also shut down if they feel that you as the leader are establishing an environment in which only the most vocal can speak. Take an active role in managing this process at first – your group will thank you for it.

Examples: (Remember, this is most pertinent to the early stages of a group and is not a permanent model.) “I love how rich this discussion is. In order to honor our time, though, I’m going to move us on to the next activity;” “It seems like we are getting off course. Let me pull us back again to the topic of discussion so we can respect those who wish to discuss the material;” “I haven’t heard anyone from this side of the room speak up. Would any of you like to share?”

Bottom Line 2: As your group matures, your role will be to foster shared ownership of conversation, gatherings, and projects.

This key is the flipside to “be directive at first.” It is true that your group will depend on your direction and structure in its beginning stages. But as time goes on and your group begins to settle in, giving people space to exercise their spiritual gifts in relationship with one another is essential to growth. This growth can’t happen if we leaders are the primary driver of conversation and activities every week. Stepping out of the way allows people to learn.

People learn about *themselves* as they hear themselves speak, and as group members offer affirmation of God-given gifts and talents. People learn about *each other* by listening to how God has worked in the lives of their fellow group members. As you see this growth unfold, you can turn over some responsibilities to your people. It cultivates deeper growth in the long run – people are always more motivated to invest in something in which they have some ownership.

Examples: “I’ve noticed you have a gift for ___. What do you think would be a good idea for the social event next week?” “You all seem to be interested by this topic. Let’s stay with this question for a while;” “___ is passionate about ___. She’s going to share next week;” “This event is happening soon. Maybe some of you could organize and find a way for us to attend as a group?”

4. REDIRECT CHALLENGING COMMENTS

Bottom Line: Out of place comments will occur in small groups. Receive them gracefully, but confidently guide the conversation back to where it needs to be.

To redirect is to gracefully acknowledge an off-topic or insensitive comment yet pull the conversation back to the topic. You can also redirect if someone is talking too much. When you redirect, you first “catch” the comment, but then affirm your commitment to holding the structure of the group time. In doing so, you will make your group dynamic feel safe and trustworthy. This can be done with phrases like, “Thank you so much for sharing that. What does the rest of the group think about question number 3?” Or, “That sounds very difficult. I’m sorry. Maybe we could come back to that a little later.” Or even,

8 KEYS FOR LEADING YOUR SMALL GROUP

"Thank you – let's open up some space for those who haven't spoken yet." Redirection is not intended for comments that are just heavy or controversial while still being respectful. In fact, we want people to be vulnerable and real. Instead, it may be necessary in the manner of the following examples. (If persons consistently make out of place comments, refer to the below document, "Dealing with Challenging Group Dynamics.")

- *Leader: "What came to mind as you watched the video?" Member: "I just can't stand my neighbor. He's the worst and I hope bad things happen to him and people like him. No one in this group better be like my neighbor." L: "It sounds like it's really weighing on you – would you like to share more with me after the group? What do the rest of us think of the video?" [Of course, the issue is that this member's comment makes others feel unsafe.]*
- *A leader asks how everyone is doing. One member names a struggle they are having – but he continually talks over people, avoids the topic of discussion, and generally tries to bring up his struggle over and over until it removes permission for others to speak, or for the leader to discuss the topic. [The issue here is not that someone names a struggle, even more than once – we want people to be able to do that so we can care for them! The issue is the frequency, intensity, and controlling nature of the comments, which may be an indication that mental health resources would better address the issue facing the member.]*

See a live example at <https://groups.cor.org/resources/>



KEYS FOR LISTENING WELL

5. KNOW WHEN TO USE EMPATHY VS SYMPATHY

Bottom Line: Avoid saying to your people, "I understand what you're going through." Usually, we do not truly understand what someone is going through. Instead, simply validate the feelings they name.

Maybe you have heard that empathy is good and sympathy is bad. Empathy is to put yourself in the shoes of another and allow yourself to feel what they feel ("feeling with"). Sympathy is to feel

compassion on behalf of someone (“feeling for”). Empathy is a shared emotion that connects you to others. Sympathy is a personal emotion that comes from within yourself. While empathy is the more powerful posture of connection in that it expresses authentic care, it comes with the risk of overidentification (when you get too confident that you understand what someone is feeling). Sympathy, on the other hand, runs the risk of under-identification when you make the other person feel pitied rather than cared for (“I feel sorry for you”), but it is helpful in that it guards against ingenuine comprehension of someone else’s unique feelings. The best thing you can do as a small group leader when someone shares what they are going through is to listen well, let them know that their feelings are valid, and to reiterate that their struggles are legitimate. This safeguards you from seeming like you understand too much or not enough.

Good Examples: “That sounds really hard;” “I’m so sorry to hear you are going through that;” “It makes complete sense that you would feel that way;” “I’m so glad that you feel proud of yourself, that is a big accomplishment.”

Bad examples: “I know exactly what you are going through;” “I feel so sorry for you;” “I’ve felt the same way, and I handled it by ___;” “Your life is definitely hard right now.” (This last example makes someone feel pitied and uncared for – it’s the “under-identification” mentioned above. Instead, try, “It sounds like you are carrying a number of heavy things. How can we support you in this journey?”)

6. SILENCE IS NOT THE ENEMY

Bottom Line: Many small group leaders try to fill silence, which removes permission for people to take time to think. Instead, learn to trust silence as a sign that their gears are turning.

This one isn’t complicated, and all it takes is a mental shift. Silence in group discussion often makes us feel uncomfortable – this feeling is completely normal. You start to think, “Is this going well? Am I doing okay as a leader?” So you answer your own question or call on someone. But silence usually just means your people are thinking. If you establish a pattern in which people have time to think before speaking, everyone will feel more comfortable with silence. If you try to fill silence, it will have the reverse effect of causing people to think they must have a fully formed answer at their disposal in order to speak. If silence starts to last too long - more than 7 or 8 seconds - then you can prompt them. But it’s usually not as long as you think!

Examples: After a moment of silence: “It’s okay not to answer right away – take some time to think.” When even that doesn’t work: “Okay, that’s alright. I’ll give one more opportunity to hear from someone if you wish to speak, and then we can move on.”

See a live example at <https://groups.cor.org/resources/>



7. AVOID THE HABIT OF PROVIDING SOLUTIONS

Bottom Line: Growth occurs when someone is able to work through challenges. Provide answers or solutions only after you have first given someone an opportunity to grow.


We are curious by nature, always looking for answers. Yet we profess a faith that is a mystery: Father, Son, Holy Spirit as three persons, but one God – which raises all sorts of questions! It's no wonder we're curious. Even in the not so theological matters of our lives, we crave answers. How should I live? Why do my relationships struggle? What do I do when I encounter trouble at work? As a leader, it feels good to be able to answer questions and provide solutions. While it may be helpful at times to provide answers, our first priority should be the growth of the people in the group. When we provide a solution to a problem, we may be taking away opportunities for group members to learn. (We also miss out on experiencing the mystery of God, who cannot be captured by simple answers.) **At the end of the day, it is unlikely that someone has signed up for your small group looking for answers.** It is more likely they are there for a connection to a community of believers and an encounter with God. If someone seeks answers, first allow them the opportunity to grow. If they still need guidance and you are confident you have the right words for them, by all means, share them.

Examples: "That's a great question. I'll be honest that I may not know the best answer;" "That certainly is a complex problem you are facing. Maybe the first thing we can do before brainstorming is pray for you as a group;" "That is an interesting point you raise. Maybe you and I both could do some digging on that issue and discuss it when we meet next week;" "Hmm. I know you'd like an answer here. But take some time to consider your question – what do you think?"

A KEY TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

8. USING "I LANGUAGE" ABOUT GOD

Bottom Line: When your group members are able to talk about their relationships with God – rather than just learn information about God – you are in a prime spot for spiritual growth.



It is much easier to talk about God on an informational level than a personal level. There is a layer of security we feel when we can talk about what a passage of the Bible is saying about God, or what we think about a particular belief about God – it makes no personal claim on us. But if you want to watch a room tense up quickly, ask people to share about their relationship with God on a personal level. Suddenly, everyone is uncomfortable! That’s why it’s so easy to focus on Bible studies, curriculum, or discussion questions that ask us to talk about God rather than our relationship with God. It feels safer.

Part of this dynamic has to do with the vulnerability of talking about our personal relationship with God. There is a necessary level of trust and safety that must be present for your group to feel confident to open up in this way. When we have not created a group culture that feels trusting, fun, and safe, it will be harder for the members to experience the growth that comes from talking about their relationships with God, nor should we force that kind of sharing.

But this kind of sharing is the goal. Spiritual growth in small groups occurs when our relationship with God is front and center. It may take some time and work to develop this comfort level, but it will be well worth it. When your group has settled and developed a sense of trust, here’s a trick to foster spiritual growth: I call it using “I language” about God. This refers to those times people in your group say things like, “I saw God in my life at (a particular place) this week,” or “I think God has been doing ___ in my life over the last year,” or even, “I’m having a hard time connecting with God right now.” When they are speaking in this manner, it means they are successfully making connections between God and their personal lives. That is the sweet spot for small groups – an honest dialogue over one’s relationship with God, not just information about God.

How does a group get to that level? First, if you are comfortable talking about your relationship with God with “I (or my) language,” your group will be, too. You can model it.

- “This material reminds me of a time in my life where God was working in this way.”
- “This speaks to how I experience God...it may look differently for you, but for me it looks like ____.”
- I’ve really seen God working in my life by _____.

Second, you should make it a goal in every session to ask a question that connects the material to your members’ relationships with God. The Small Group Journals intentionally do this in every lesson, so you can rely on those discussion questions to accomplish this part. If you’re not using the journal for your meeting, you can ask these questions as a supplement to your material:

- “What might this material say about your relationship with God or what God is doing in your life?”
- And then, “How is your relationship with God this week? How do you want it to change or stay the same in light of what we’ve talked about?”

DEALING WITH CHALLENGING GROUP DYNAMICS

PASTOR JUSTIN SCHOOLCRAFT
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The goal for any small group is growth that leads to a deeper relationship with God. What we recognize in small groups ministry is that conversation with believers is vital to that process. In order for that kind of conversation to occur, though, the group must feel like a safe space.

Creating safe space is hard work, especially if you have difficult personalities at play. This document is to help small group leaders respond to challenges in a group when they arise. Specifically, we want leaders to have a sense for what to do in the event that a member of a group is sharing or acting inappropriately. By “inappropriately,” we do not mean “controversial” in their opinions or “emotional.” We specifically mean those rare occasions in which someone dominates a group to the detriment of others, or repeatedly shares overtly offensive or out-of-context remarks that make conversation unmanageable. When that happens, what do you do? The temptation might be to ostracize that member, but that’s not what we want to happen! **Our hope is to model grace and accountability that reflects the love of Christ** when dynamics like this arise. Here’s a possible roadmap.

1. Make sure that everyone has agreed to common standards. There is a list of standards in the small group journals, but you can go to groups.cor.org for a sample member agreement if you aren’t using those. In that agreement is a clear statement indicating that the leader will initiate a conversation if dialogue arises that contradicts the standard of respect.
2. Redirect in the moment, as per the key mentioned above, if you have a member who is consistently saying things that are off-topic or off-base. You can also use this tool if someone is sharing too frequently without letting others speak. Redirection is not a tool to shut people down, but to keep everyone on topic. When comments like this occur, you should respond to the person but confidently redirect the conversation back on track. If comments are so intense or inappropriate that it is significantly damaging your group time, you should absolutely state out loud during group time that such comments are not reflective of group standards, and that you will need to talk with the individual in question after the fact.
3. Talk to the group member in question in private if their comments consistently prevent the group from communicating effectively. Here are some possible things you could say to that person. There are lots of examples so that you can choose the one that feels right for the given situation.
 - *“Hey, I notice you feel really comfortable sharing thoughts and personal experiences in our group. Would you mind helping me model and encourage others to feel comfortable speaking out like you?”*

- *"If I say, 'can I interrupt you' - let's have it serve as a sign between us that I need your help opening up space for someone who hasn't spoken yet.*
- *"Let's work together to make the group feel safe for those who aren't as comfortable as you."*
- *It seems like you want the group to know _____ (about your battle with an illness? About your hard relationship with the church/or with another person?) As a newer small group, though, it may be a subject that takes some work before they feel comfortable responding well.*
- *This isn't your intention when you share ____, but group members may shut down and not feel like their story matters, OR you may start to feel like the group has stopped listening to you.*
- *I know __ is an important part of your story. Can we meet outside of group so I can hear more?*
- *Can I connect you with a care and connections pastor to help process things more?*
- *Can I connect you with a counselor (through our counseling referral ministry) so you can continue to process your story in a meaningful way with someone who is trained to be a really, good listener?*

4. If the problem persists, remind the person of the conversation you had with them and let them know that the expectations in the group agreement stand.

5. If the problem still persists, refer to Pastor Justin for a plan on how best to care for the individual and your group, which will draw upon the many supportive resources our church has to offer, including our excellent counseling ministry if it is needed.

The goal here is twofold: maintaining a healthy and fun group for everyone, and encouraging real, healthy growth for persons who are struggling to participate well. Our goal is not to ostracize anyone, but to truly care for them in the way Jesus would have us. If we give the person the silent treatment or never confront the issue, we will not be truly helping them grow, and the whole group will feel uncomfortable. We want to emphasize one final time that this process is not intended for those who are sharing unique perspectives, heavy stories, or deep emotion. Those are signs of a safe space and are not to be deterred, even if you have different perspectives. This is instead when behavior emerges that makes the goal of the small group – conversation promoting spiritual growth – unattainable due to the impact that it creates.

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