

Central Baptist Church Growth Group Leaders Guide

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Healthy Growth Groups

Our Basic Purpose:

Growth groups exist to promote the development of significant Christ centered relationships which are built on the study of God's Word.

Our Common Practice:

Study: Each week we study a portion of God's word. Our goal is to learn from each other how to apply God's word to our daily lives.

Sharing: Each week we take time to share what is happening in our lives so that we can deepen our friendships.

Support: Each week we will care for each other by praying, listening, encouraging, challenging and meeting needs.

Our Greater Concern

Outreach: We will hold each other accountable to pray for and connect with people who do not yet have faith.

Service: We will specifically identify ways in which we can serve others inside and outside the church.

Our Commitment:

We will seek to maintain a healthy group by:

Focusing on spiritual growth as our top priority.

Accepting one another in love.

Treating each other with respect in both speech and action.

Protecting each others confidences.

Contributing to group interactions, while always taking care to give opportunity for others to also contribute.

Establishing Ground Rules

Ground rules define the character and focus of a group by outlining expectations for each group member. Ground rules should be renewed whenever a group starts, returns after a significant break or when new members join.

Ground rules can help a leader confront bad behavior by allowing them to appeal to agreed on rules rather than personal opinion.

Each group should set their own ground rules. Some areas of discussion include:

1. Timing. When do we start, when do we end, how much time do we spend on study, sharing and support? Is there a timekeeper?
2. Attendance. We will do our best to attend the group and call when we know that we cannot make it.
3. Homework. How should people prepare for a meeting?
4. Protecting Confidences.
5. Feedback. We will talk to our leaders when dissatisfied so that we can deal with problems that may arise.
6. Childcare. Are children welcome in the meeting? How is childcare organized?
7. Food. Will there be food and who is responsible to bring it?
8. Advice. Is it freely given or should we ask permission?
9. Participate but don't dominate: All members should be free to contribute to a discussion and all members must guard themselves from talking too much.

What Should Happen at a Typical Meeting?

Each group should plan the specific style of their meeting. According to common practice, most groups set aside time for study, sharing and support. This is most often expressed in Bible study discussion, personal sharing and prayer.

- Study / Discussion:** This is usually the largest portion of a meeting, typically taking about 50 percent of the time together
- Personal Sharing:** This will often take the form of sharing prayer requests. Be sure to give time for group members to talk about their lives.
- Prayer:** Take time to support each other in prayer and to remember larger concerns outside the group.
- Socializing:** It is important to include time for small talk. Usually this happens at the beginning and ending of the group. Do not underestimate the importance of building friendships.
- Greater Concerns** In order for groups to maintain a connection to the larger church and community, it is important to spend some time talking about service, outreach and other ways in which groups can connect with greater concerns.

What Should a Group Study?

Each Growth Group has the freedom to select study materials that suit their interest, need and ability. At Central we have made a commitment to support growth groups with effective and accessible sermon based resources.

Advantages of Sermon Based Resources:

1. The materials are designed to be accessible to all Christians providing moderate Bible study and personal application.
2. Integration with the morning message, allows people to focus on one idea, thus guarding against information overload.
3. In busy lives, it is sometimes hard to prepare for a study. Studies that track with the Sunday sermons give people a head start in preparations.
4. Less preparation is required for group leaders allowing them to focus on wider concerns than being a detailed teacher.
5. Open groups can include new members without them feeling like they have missed out on previous discussions.

Our sermon based growth group materials also contain elements which will help a group connect to greater concerns. Starting in fall 2010 we will be including churchwide prayer concerns so that your group can pray with others for concerns that face the whole church.

In addition we will provide materials in the “Braching Out” section that will direct groups to wider concerns in the church. Every 4 to 6 weeks we will identify an opportunity to consider a topic not directly addressed in the study. This will help groups prepare for significant events and seasons in the church. For example, groups will be encouraged to plan service projects, participate in outreach events, pray for missionaries and be attentive to new people

Effective Study Discussions

Effective discussions are designed to promote participation and personal engagement. Discussions are not about getting the right answers as quickly as possible. Each group member should have the goal of using the discussion to reflect on how biblical truth can shape one's life.

Participate, but don't dominate

Every group member should have the freedom to contribute to a discussion, but every member needs to be responsible to make sure that others have an opportunity to contribute. Make an effort to speak, but also make an effort to not speak too much.

The Discussion facilitator must be comfortable with silence and encourage others to make the observations. For instance: If a person in the group asks a question, the discipleship facilitator could say something like "Does anyone have an idea about this?"

If an individual is frequently dominating discussions, it is best for a leader to speak to them one on one. Bring up your concern that others are not talking as much as you would like and invite that person to help you give others the opportunity to talk. It would help if your group has created a ground rule about this sort of issue.

Acknowledge contributions

The best way for a leader to make comments is to do so in support of what someone else has already said. This can also encourage timid people, when you validate their responses.

For instance: Someone might ask "Why did Jesus hide from the crowds in Mark 1:37-38?" Another group member might respond "Maybe he didn't want it to become a circus." The leader might then say "Good point, Jesus didn't want to become overwhelmed with people looking for miracles. Does anyone else have a thought on this? Is there another reason why he avoided this crowd?"

Adapt your study materials

If you are using a study guide or a list of questions, be aware that you do not need to ask and answer every question. Select the questions which lead to the best discussion opportunities. Feel free to move quickly past some questions.

Be open to the questions that group members are asking, they are often more important than the questions which are provided.

Be sure to manage your time and do not let the study questions crowd out prayer and sharing.

Guard against death by tangent

While it is very important to allow for questions from group members, sometimes the questions or comments can lead the group off focus. Leaders must monitor the feel of the group and pull people back to topic when appropriate.

Sometimes it is as simple as specifically calling the group back to focus. “Okay so have we exhausted question 2 or does anyone else have a thought about”

If a person chronically pulls the group off tangent, a leader will need to speak to them one on one and confront the issue.

If a person continues to bring up an issue week after week, it may be necessary to deal with this mid flow. “David, you have brought this up several times before, lets talk about this after the meeting, but for now I feel that I need to pull the group back to question 3.”

A significant personal crisis is an acceptable tangent. If someone shares something deeply emotional or personal it is important to spend time supporting this person by listening and praying. Take a break from the study and meet the need.

Use the best questions

Not all questions are created equal. When questions are too simple, answers come quickly, or worse, people are embarrassed to say the obvious answer. Good questions create thoughtful discussion and help people open up personally. Feel free to move quickly past some questions, skip some questions all together and linger on questions that work.

When questions invite personal response, are sensitive, be comfortable with silence and allow people to contribute. Perhaps lead with a personal response to break the ice and set an example.

If the questions provided do not do their job, come up with your own open ended questions or use some of these general standby questions

1. What does this teach us about God or the why he interacts with people
2. What does this teach us about God’s will for our lives?
3. Which verse stands out to you as the key verse in this passage?
4. How would you summarize the overall message of this passage?
5. Is there anything here that puzzles you or something you would like to comment on?

Effective Sharing and Support

The foundational element for any successful growth group is that the group members develop love for one another and friendship with each other. Growth groups which do not have a foundation of caring friendship will be limited in their ability to support each other and serve together. Several factors are important in developing this foundation

Develop and talk about foundational commitments and ground rules

Groups need to be safe places ruled by honesty, respect and love. Talk about these fundamental needs. As a leader continues to name these values as you see them displayed in the group.

Above all model positive behavior as a leader

There is no substitute for time together

All friendships are developed over time. Groups need to meet regularly and find ways to interact socially. It is recommended that groups meet 3 times a month to create a sense of consistency.

Plan service and social events at various times during the year. As a suggested minimum, look for two planned social events and one service project.

Practical help

When group members need help the group needs to rise to the occasion. Look to support each other during significant events such as death in the family, new babies, illnesses and moves.

Model personal connection:

Leaders must take the initiative to model personal connection by being willing to share feelings, be open to authentic accountability and ask for personal prayer requests. If the leaders will not go beyond the surface, the group will not go beyond the surface.

Notice absences

If someone does not attend a group meeting or a Sunday service and you do not know why, be sure to follow up with them the next day.

Create time for sharing and support.

At some time during a group meeting, members should be encouraged to talk about their lives. Sometimes this will come about through the application study questions, but more often members will want to report on challenges and celebrations they are facing in life.

Leaders can use specific invitational questions to call forth sharing. At times it may be appropriate to ask a specific person a follow up question about something they have shared at a previous meeting. At other times a general question to the whole group may be appropriate.

Sample questions could be

- Does anybody have anything they would like to share with the group
- What are your highs and lows this week
- Does anybody have a challenge or celebration this week?
- Does anybody have a prayer request?

Make it personal

Every group member needs to make an effort to be personal with the group. It takes time to build trust, but do not hold back forever. Group members should be encouraged to share about their lives and prayer concerns. It is fine to share the needs of others in your life, especially close friends and family members.

Accept that sharing prayer requests is an important way to share life, but be sure to reserve enough time to pray.

If you share a prayer request that is not personal, do not take too much time to explain details. It is good to pray for sick friends of friends, but do not take too much time relaying the request.

Guide Appropriate Feedback:

When a person shares sensitive feelings or needs it is sometimes better to not offer advice and feedback. On the other hand, the insights of the group can be helpful.

It is best to ask permission to share advice “Can I share with you something I have found helpful?”

Present advice as a question rather than a command “Have you considered trying”

Give people the right to say “I’m not really looking for advice, but I wanted to share with you that....”

Enhancing Group Prayer

There are many different ways to pray. The following suggestions may help revitalize your group prayer time.

1. **Personal Prayer Cards:** Have group members fill out a prayer card, listing some on going prayer concerns, ministry involvements and family needs. These cards can be passed around at the group meeting, with each person praying for the person on the card. The cards could then be taken home that week as a reminder to pray for that person during the week.
2. **Keep Track of Requests:** Obtain a stack of 3x5 cards or a small journal and have someone record the various prayer requests. This will allow you to record answers to prayer and quickly remember what requests are still active. If you use 3x5 cards, people could randomly select a card or cards and then take responsibility to pray for that request during the prayer time.
3. **Pray the Scriptures:** After the group study / lesson, before taking other requests, pray through the theme of the lesson. Have people pray for themselves, for the group in general or possibly have everyone pray for the person on their right. For example, you have studied Genesis 4 (on Cain and Able) and notice the prominent themes of resisting temptation and worshiping God with your heart. Spend time praying for each other to resist temptation and have greater passion for God.
4. **Laying on of Hands:** If a person in the group has a significant prayer request and the mood is fairly serious or heartfelt, invite the person to sit on a chair and have the group lay hands on the person and have several people pray. This may be a prayer for healing, guidance or spiritual growth.
5. **Silent Prayer:** This is particularly effective as a way to start your group study. It allows people to focus on God and put aside the chit chat. Simply spend time in silence (at least a minute or 2) and then have someone open in prayer inviting God to speak through the study time. After this it may be appropriate to have someone read the scriptures which are the focus of the study.
6. **Use the ACTS model:** In order to prevent the prayer time from simply becoming a list of requests, use this model to invite a broader experience of prayer. This method will require a leader to guide the group prayer time and transition for step to step. ACTS stands for

Adoration: Spend time just worship God for who he is

Confession: Spend time in silent or spoken confession of sin

Thanksgiving: Thank God for the things he has done

Supplication: Make prayer requests for self and others

Greater Concerns

Growth groups naturally tend towards an inward focus. As friendships deepen and people begin caring for each other in more significant ways, the relational bonds within the group get stronger and stronger. This is good, for it is one of the purposes of growth groups. There are however a few things that can be done ensure that group closeness does not lead to stagnancy.

The branching out section in the sermon based materials

In order to facilitate an outward focus and connection with the larger church, the sermon based growth group materials will offer practical suggestions for group to embody the values of the church.

Every four to six weeks a new focus will be presented. We would ask leaders to make time to discuss the branching out section and encourage the group to experiment with the opportunities involved.

Serve together

Working together as a team to benefit those not in the group is an easy way to bring a fresh sense of purpose to a group. Not only does this enlarge the heart of the group, but it also deepens the friendships within the group as people work together. Some ideas for team ministry include:

1. Serving together at Breakfast club
2. Assembling a Christmas hamper or Samaritans purse gift box.
3. Cooking a meal for Christianity Explored
4. Doing yard work for a needy friend or neighbor
5. Taking more initiative in connecting with a missionary

The best service projects are those that your group members discover for themselves.

Add People to the Group

Group size is usually limited by physical space and by group dynamics. Pay attention to how many people can comfortably fit in the room in which you meet. If you have room to add people to the group, the best way is for the group to take the initiative. Talk about the need to add people to the group and invite the group to suggest people who could be invited to join. Approach these people and invite them to consider joining the group.