

BIBLE STUDY LEADERS NOTES

Introduction

Our Bible studies are designed to be thought provoking. They aim to lead people to discover what the Bible says, rather than simply telling them what it says.

The studies are planned to follow the pattern of:-

Opening prayer

One-hour study

Closing prayer and worship

There will be time for a cup of tea and a chat at the end.

Fellowship is Important

It is not always easy to build relationships in church, whilst sitting in a pew, looking at the back of the head of the person in front. We all like to see the person in front. We all like to see the person we are talking to.

Over coffee after the service there is a chance to learn people's names and to get to know a little about them, but it takes time and people tend to remain as acquaintances, rather than becoming friends.

When we meet face to face in a small group, we learn things about each other that move us from the superficial into a very precious kind of Christian friendship.

Within the group people can be open, and learn to treat each others confidences with discretion, so that trust may grow, with a caring for each other that is the special mark of Christian fellowship.

Mid-week fellowships create an opportunity for people to find personal answers to the questions that change lives. The small group is a place where living as a Christian can be explored and mutual accountability can be expressed.

The Early Church

The early church had two focal points, the church and the home fellowships: 'Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (Acts 2.46,47).

From the 'bands' of St. Francis of Assisi and the 'groups' of the Methodist revival, the evidence is that small groups are an effective means for Christian growth.

It is important that group members should believe the evening is worth their effort to come out to. This means the leader must prepare properly, reading not only the study for that week, but also glancing through the study for next week in case there is anything that needs to be said about it this week.

The group members should value the evening as a safe place to learn to share faith, gain knowledge and experience, and discover Christian friendship. It can be a place for the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.

Location

The location of the meeting can strongly affect the character of the session. In the church hall the meeting can be too large and formal, with the individual contributions low. In the Vicarage the meeting can be semi-formal; with the minister as the 'resident expert' people can be reticent. On neutral ground such as a home, people tend to relax, chat and contribute more.

The meeting needs a suitable room with seating and space for up to fifteen people, without becoming too crowded. This impacts on the dynamics of the group.

Group Size

A group of less than six people is not ideal. Because it is family sized, everyone gets to know each other so well that it becomes difficult for anyone new to join the group.

With a group larger than sixteen the character changes to greater formality. Natural conversation is more difficult. People tend to make statements and the leader makes a speech.

A group of between seven and fifteen people is small enough to be friendly. It can accommodate questions and discussion, with everyone having the possibility of joining in if they want to. This is the easiest size of group for a newcomer to join and feel welcome; it is neither too large and daunting nor is it so small that it makes anyone joining feel like an intruder.

A further advantage of the middle sized group is that it can cope with one or two people being away, and still have enough people present to remain viable for those who have turned up.

When the dynamics of the group are correct, it becomes conducive to a shared belonging, giving purpose, security, responsibility, sense of achievement, learning, trusting and growth. Which of these elements come to the fore can be influenced by the leaders style and the way the study material is used.

Leadership Skills

Leading a small group requires new skills. People learn 10% from what they hear, 50% from what they see, 70% from what they say and 90% from what they do. The leader and the members learn much by just doing it. The leader has to be focused on encouraging the members to say and do more. This has to be done without embarrassing people.

When reading through the material for the evening, the leader needs to notice that the material is organised first to give an understanding of the context, with an opportunity for discussion, and second, to lead into questions the leader can use to stimulate response. When asking questions, the leader should use wording that requires more than a yes or no answer, and should involve people: "What do you think about ...?"

The leader is not a chair person. The discussion should flow from person to person, not just back to the leader. If people do reply just to the leader, he can turn to another person and invite them to answer instead. Part of the aim is to get people talking to each other and learning to listen to each other.

Involve the Members

Members should be encouraged to take responsibility for parts of the session. At the end of the first session, after they have seen what goes on, quietly ask someone to prepare the opening prayer for next week, and someone else to prepare the beginning prayer for the closing prayer and worship time. Suggest they can write down their own words, or read from a book or just make it up at the time, whatever they would prefer.

The purpose is not to embarrass people, but to give them the experience of growing and becoming more confident of their faith, in the shelter of a trusting environment.

Coping with Relationships

Where the use of midweek fellowships is new, there will be hesitation about joining. On average, if a leader is given a list of thirty names to invite about twelve will accept. Within the group there will be people who may know each other well, or hardly at all. It will be a mix of relationships. The number of relationships can be calculated:-

$$\frac{(\text{Number in group}) \times (\text{Number in group less 1})}{2}$$

e.g., for a group of 12 people the number of relationships is:

$$\frac{12 \times 11}{2} = 66$$

People are not only developing relationships with each other, they are also playing life roles of their own.

The group members could include people with life role types such as: intellectualiser, joker, student, non-participator, distracter, aggressor, facilitator, harmoniser, judge. The leader will have to enable everyone to get on with each other, helping them to learn to accept each other.

Sometimes, these character differences can cause conflict. Facing the problem can be beneficial, the extent of unity and equilibrium in a group will be higher after a well handled disagreement than it was before, because the masks people have in life will have been lifted a little and people will know each other a little better.

Making People Comfortable

The degree of frankness between members needs sensitive handling. People need to know that confidentiality and discretion go with truth and honesty. A confidence betrayed can ruin the evolution of Christian fellowship.

The extent that people feel cared about will show in the thought and care that the leader gives to preparing for the session. Before anyone arrives, the leader will ensure that the room is warm and well lit, with seating organised in a comfortable circle.

The time together should have a clear and regular pattern, so that people can become comfortable in the routine. Our studies have been planned on the routine of a brief opening prayer, followed by the study for an hour, concluding with a prayer and meditation time, followed by a cup of tea or coffee and general chat.

The First Week

In the first week it is important that people should quickly start to enjoy themselves and become comfortable. Take time over warming up the meeting, the sooner the ice is broken the better. The first thirty minutes could be well spent just getting to know a little about each other.

Manage the Use of Time

After the brief opening prayer, explain that the pattern for the future weeks will be opening prayer, study, closing prayer, and fellowship time, lasting in total for no more than two hours. Ask people to try and come promptly so that you can start and finish on time. It is better for the leader to finish on time, than to take a session, however interesting it may be, beyond the agreed time. There may well be a member who has had real opposition to their attendance and they need to return home at a promised time.

Ice Breaking Opening

After the opening prayer and explanation, discuss the nature of group membership. It is a time for people to get to know each other. In time to come they may well be able to help each other, to care and pray for each other, but first there is a chance to learn something personal about each other. One method to break the ice is to give everyone a slip of paper and ask them to write down answers: Favourite TV programme? Favourite food? If you could not be you, who would you have liked to be? What word describes your life now? Go round the group asking each person to say their name and share their answers, and if they want, the reason for their choice. Discussion could ensue about what this reveals about the group as a whole.

When people are comfortable with each other, progress can be more rapid. Because of the 'getting to know you' time, the study content for week one may be more than can be covered in the allotted time. This does not matter, successive weeks are not dependent on the prior weeks study being fully covered.

Closing and Encouraging

The closure prayers for week one are for guidance. The leader needs to show that prayer can be easy. The leader must use prepared prayers so that group members can see that they also can use ready made prayers.

Where the group has a musician or confident singers, songs and choruses of praise can be very inspiring. Allow variety into the closing worship time, including silence, so that people's experience of prayer and praise may be extended not only by hearing others, but also through gaining more confidence to share their own prayers, each having a role in enriching the experience of the others, so encourage members to bring prayers, poems, readings, music to share at the closing worship time.

During the tea and chat time, ask one of the members to do the opening prayer next week, and someone else to do the first prayer in the closing worship time. Make a note of the names of who has been asked.

What Next?

It often happens with a short course that the people are having such a good time that at the end they do not want to break up. This can be difficult. On the one hand the habit of group membership, once broken, tends to wither quickly. On the other hand the commitment was for this course only. To extend the course will be seen by some as a trick and it will put people off enrolling next time. Instead, this course will be followed by a new course which people can choose if they want to join or not.