

# Community Group Leader Handbook

## Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to equip you to lead a Community Group with confidence. We hope you will learn how to navigate leading the group, handle group dynamics, and know the resources available to you. We also want you to see this study in the larger context of the gospel and God's transformative work in our hearts.

The purpose of a community group is for our members to strive to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of life change. We hold to a core belief that change happens best in the context of biblical community and we have come to know this process of change as spiritual formation.

## Preparing for the Group

- Pray, pray, pray – before, during and after the group meets!
  - Pray for each person in your group even before you know their names.
  - Pray before and after each meeting.
- Think intentionally about how you can be leading, shepherding, partnering, and cultivating with your group before you begin and throughout the study. Tailor this to the make up and needs of your group.
- Know the material. Remember that you are not teaching, but you do need to be prepared. Use great questions to facilitate discussion, not a lecture.
- Know your own story, where the Lord has redeemed and changed you through your own study of the material, and be prepared to share appropriately. Plan to be vulnerable and transparent as you work through the study to encourage and model transparency to others. Know how and how much you will share, what is appropriate for the group and honoring to others in your story.
- Consider asking another experienced leader to meet for coffee or talk on the phone to discuss her strategies for starting and leading groups well. Come prepared with questions.
- Keep in mind that the goal is not to fix anyone or any problem but to come alongside them as they walk through life and begin to apply what they are learning.
- Approach the group with a humble and eager spirit, ready to learn and grow along with your group members. Leading a group through a biblically based study is a great responsibility that you should take seriously.
- Prepare your own heart for the work God will do in your life!

## Pre-Meeting Logistics

- Send a welcome email introducing yourself and reminding everyone about the details: when and where you will meet, what to expect at the first meeting, how to prepare. Consider calling each participant to welcome them to the group and answer any questions.
- Share the group list so members can begin learning each other's names.

## First Meeting Ideas

- Find a comfortable setting where private conversation can be held. Set up chairs in advance. Consider ways to make the space inviting.
- Provide something to eat and drink.
- Use nametags for the first couple of meetings until everyone knows each other's names.

- Start with basic introductions and one easy icebreaker question. Be the first to share to set the stage for how much detail you are looking for. Examples:
  - Why did you sign up for a community group? What do you hope to learn?
  - What do you like to do for fun?
  - What is the best thing that happened to you this week?
  - Consider sharing something a little deeper to show the group that you are willing to be transparent from the beginning.
- Take notes so you remember details about each person and then review the notes before each meeting.
- Give a brief overview of the year.
- Remind members of the group that they will get out what they put in. Encourage them to do any necessary preparation before each meeting so that they can fully engage in the group.
- Set some ground rules:
  - Everything shared in the group is confidential; it is a safe environment.
  - Everyone has something to share and something to learn. Be willing to share but also be intentional in listening to what others have to say.
  - Be available to meet privately if someone needs to talk further or is not comfortable sharing something yet.
  - Keep prayer requests personal.
  - Commit to starting and ending on time, but leave the option open for group members to stay later if the discussion continues.

## **Leading the Group**

### **Tips on Leading and Co-Leading Well**

Grace Community groups frequently have co-leaders, two couples leading the group together. This can be a wonderful, enriching experience. But it also can present challenges, particularly if you don't communicate your expectations in advance.

- Contact your co-leader before the first meeting to discuss expectations. Together plan how you will lead and who will do what.
  - Where will you meet? Who will email the group? Who will plan the icebreaker?
  - Will you take turns with who leads the discussion each week?
  - Will one person lead the discussions while the other handles the administrative tasks?
  - Is one leader more experienced while the other is an apprentice and wants to observe, learn and try leading later in the study?
  - Can one person summarize the sections and the other ask questions? There are many ways you can co-lead effectively.
  - If your co-leader is leading, allow her them space to lead. Be supportive and allow others to talk. Be ready to jump in if they needs help or no one is talking. It typically does not work well for two people to lead the discussion at the same time.
- After each meeting, discuss what went well and what could have gone better. You are a team! Be positive and encouraging. What can you do differently next time? Do you need to follow up with anyone? Who will do that?
- Pray together for the people in your group.
- Sit on opposite sides of the room to naturally spread out the conversation and engage the whole group.
- Touch base before each meeting to make a game plan.

## Icebreakers

- Icebreakers are a great way to help the group get to know each other and grow comfortable more quickly. They also give an opportunity for everyone to participate by answering an easy, nonthreatening question.
- Consider using a short icebreaker every week.
- Start with easy questions and progress each week to more challenging questions that reveal the heart.
- Here are some questions we have used. You can find many more using an online search or asking other leaders.
  - Divide people into pairs. Give them a short list of questions to ask each other such as where you grew up, something about your family, an interesting fact. Then take turns introducing your new friend.
  - What was your first job?
  - What is your favorite comfort food?
  - Tell an interesting fact about the place where you grew up.
  - Tell about your worst haircut/hairstyle!
  - Ask in advance so everyone has time to prepare: Bring a photograph of yourself from a different season of life.
  - What are your top three go-to internet sites? Why?
  - What is your dream vacation? Dream job?
  - Share an adjective that describes your personality that also starts with the first letter of your name.
  - What is one interesting thing about you that no one else in the room knows?
  - Describe an ideal Friday night. Or describe your perfect Saturday.
  - What season of life (winter, spring, summer or fall) are you in and why?
  - Name one accomplishment and one regret from this week.
  - What was the worst thing that happened this week?
  - What was the biggest challenge you faced this week?
  - For you, is the glass half-empty or half-full? Why?
  - What was your proudest moment?
  - What is one thing about your current circumstances you wish you could change?
  - Describe an embarrassing moment and what it taught you.
  - Ask in advance so everyone has time to prepare: Share your favorite verse and why you chose it.
  - How do you want to be remembered? If you died today, would you be remembered that way?
  - What do you dream about?
  - What is one of your best/worst attributes?
- Ask others in your group to come up with icebreaker questions, especially someone who has shown leadership potential.

## Leading Through the Material and Facilitating Discussion

These are some ideas to help you lead through group discussions. Please do not feel that you have to use all of them; use what works best for you and your group. Remember that you a facilitator, not a teacher.

- Through the week be thinking of questions that will facilitate discussion. Write these questions down as you go.
- Identify the main points that you want to get across each week and allow those to direct your discussion. Use examples and stories whenever possible.
- Summarize sections and review the main points or ask members to do this.
- As you go through each section, ask participants to share what impacted them in that section.
- Go straight to the questions.
- Turn to a page of questions and ask everyone to share their answer from any one of the questions on that page.

- Don't be overly focused on going over every question if the conversation is flowing. In advance, choose those questions in each section that seem most important for your group to discuss and focus on those. Skip over questions that have already come up in your discussion.
- Have others read key passages aloud and then discuss them. This is especially helpful to get your discussion back on target.
- Ask members in advance to come prepared with something from the material that impacted them, what was challenging, what resonated, etc.
- Remember to ask open-ended questions. As you go through the material, write your own questions in the margins.
- Keep a list of go-to questions handy (such as those in the next section).
- Be comfortable with silence to allow people time to think and answer.
- If you don't feel the discussion went well, try a different technique next week. Mix it up to keep the group discussion interesting.
- Don't be afraid to end the meeting early if discussion has dwindled.

### **Asking Good Questions**

- Go-to questions:
  - Turn to page \_\_\_\_\_. Did anything stand out to you on the topic of \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What impacted you about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What does it mean to \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What did this chapter or topic open your eyes to that you had not seen or thought of before? Did this chapter or topic cause you to think differently? If so, how?
  - Is there anything in this section that you don't agree with? Why?
  - What change will you make this week in response to this chapter?
  - Turn to page \_\_\_\_\_. Does anything stand out to you?
  - Look at page \_\_\_\_\_ (page with questions). Choose any question and share your answer.

Coming up with good questions takes practice. A good resource is [How to Ask Great Questions](#), by Karen Lee-Thorp.

### **Digging Deeper**

- Be prepared to share your own struggles related to the material, where you are still struggling and how God is redeeming some struggles.
- Ask if anyone would like to share how God is working on them through the material.
- Try to get to the gospel/heart issue of fear, control, despair, or guilt.
  - When you say that, what are you afraid of?
  - What is holding you back as we discuss \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What is driving you?
- Follow-up as necessary, including outside of the group, with a personal email, phone call or coffee. Be available.
- Consider meeting or talking one on one with each member of your group. Encourage them to reach out to each other outside of group as well.
- When a topic comes up that is too complex for the group to carry, acknowledge that and ask to meet with the person outside of the group time. Connect them with their Community Group Pastor or the Campus pastor. Don't ignore the challenging topic, but be aware that some issues, sins and brokenness may need more attention and the professional care of a pastor or counselor.

# Encouraging Ownership

## Encouraging Ownership of Group Dynamics

- Ask someone else to coordinate a snack rotation.
- Meet at a group member's house or rotate homes if distance is not an issue.
- Have someone keep and email to the group a record of prayer requests.
- Ask different person to pray or lead an icebreaker each week.
- Ask someone to summarize different sections and review the main points as part of your discussion.
- Talk to each person outside of group to hear how they think the group is going. If they express concerns about not connecting, challenge them to be part of the solution and let them identify ways they can facilitate growth.
- Invite members to participate in group email conversation about the study throughout the week.

## Facilitating Relationships Within the Group

- Break people into groups of 2 or 3 for the last 20-30 minutes to share prayer requests. Next time, break into different groups.
- Using prayer cards can be a great way to share more personally in a non-threatening way. A few suggestions about using prayer cards:
  - Have everyone write a personal prayer request on a card, exchange cards and agree to pray for each other during the week.
  - Have each person pray for the request on the card at the end of the meeting, silently or aloud.
- Pray in pairs at the end of the meeting, using a different pair each week. Ask the pairs to initiate one contact during the week to encourage each other, such as a text, call, or email.
- Break up into pairs and share one thing that you feel the Lord is nudging you to address after each chapter. Pray together and agree to pray for each other all week. Give people a few minutes at the beginning of the next meeting to check in with each other on how it's going.
- Consider a social event on a quarterly basis. Ask group members to plan this simple event.

## Encouraging Group Members on Their Own Spiritual Growth

- Remind people that just sitting in a group is not the answer. We all need to intentionally apply what we already know and what we are now learning.
- Challenge people to consider how is God calling them to use the material to transform them into the image of Jesus.
  - What changes will you make? Who will you tell that can hold you accountable?
  - Where will you serve? How will you pursue that?
  - Who is further down the road that you can pursue for advice and wisdom? What might that look like?
    - Contact them and tell them you'd like to buy them a cup of coffee to talk about \_\_\_\_.
    - Take the initiative, not expecting someone else to pursue you.
    - Prepare a few specific questions that you want to discuss.
    - You are responsible for your own spiritual growth.
- Who can you pursue who is a few steps behind?
- Who in your life would benefit from what you've learned? How can you pursue them?
- If you attend Grace, have you gone through Foundations? Are you serving? Take steps to get involved.
- Know yourself:
  - Identify your strengths and gifts using Strengths finder, Standout, a spiritual gift test.

- Look for the next place of growth: a study, a class, a mission trip, finding a mentor, inviting someone to church, encouraging a friend to attend an Ezer group or Men's Roundtable and accompanying them, etc.

## **Identifying Potential Leaders**

We are always looking for new leaders and couples that we can equip to lead. Please pay close attention to the members in your group and be intentional about looking for new leaders and finding opportunities for them to practice.

- Who are the natural leaders in the group? Who shares wisdom? Who may not be the first to speak but hones in on what's important? Who reaches out to others? Who identifies with and supports others? Who challenges others?
- Begin looking for these couples/people at the first meeting.
- Look for ways to develop and encourage leadership skills:
  - Ask them to open or close in prayer.
  - Ask them to lead an icebreaker.
  - Ask them to coordinate a social.
  - Ask them to lead a portion of the discussion or the entire discussion one week with your support.

## **Troubleshooting**

### **Troubleshooting / Handling Common Problems**

There are some common problems that leaders frequently face when facilitating discussions. Here are some suggestions on how you might handle these challenges.

Prepare yourself in advance and have some tools ready for a sticky situation. If your first attempt doesn't go well, don't beat yourself up. Acknowledge the struggle if needed and try something different next time. See yourself as a facilitator, steering the conversation out of freedom, not fear.

- Someone who never talks
  - Ask them to read a passage out loud.
  - In advance, ask everyone to share something on a topic.
  - Contact them during the week to say that a section made you think of him/her and ask if she would be willing to share more on the topic.
  - Say, "Mary/Jon, we haven't heard from you. Would you be willing to share what you think about this chapter?"
- No one is talking
  - Ask an easy question and then ask everyone to share an answer.
  - Show vulnerability; share something personal.
  - Joke that you will start calling on them!
- Someone who dominates
  - When trying to redirect the conversation, first regain control in a kind, intentional way. Respond to something that the person has said.
  - Look away toward another person in the group
  - Ask a question specifically addressing another person.

- Say, “thank you Jon/Cindy, let’s hear from someone else.”
  - Or “what does everyone else think?”
  - Talk to that person outside of the group, thank them for sharing and ask them to help draw others out who may not be as comfortable sharing. Say, “I need you to help me with something. We have a few in our group who are very quiet and I need your help to draw them into the conversation.”
  - Outside of group, say “I’ve noticed you frequently answer first. Are you uncomfortable with silence? Next time, I want to challenge you to hold back and not be the first to fill the silence. We want to hear from you, but let’s try this to see if others who don’t speak up as much will share.”
  - At the beginning of each meeting, remind the group that we want to hear from everyone because everyone has something to share and we all have something we need to hear.
- Someone who shares unbiblical thinking:
    - Handle this situation with humility and grace but don’t be afraid to steer the person in the right direction.
    - Redirect with biblical truth.
    - Ask others what they think.
    - Ask “Does everyone agree?”
    - Clarify what she is saying and with confidence regain control
- You don’t know the answer
    - Admit that you don’t know but will find out for next time. Follow through.
    - Ask if someone else in the group has insight.
- Getting back on track after a rabbit trail
    - Remember you are steering the conversation! Sometimes a tangent is well worth the time. It may involve a personal situation that needs to be heard. You decide, with grace and wisdom, when to guide the discussion back to the study.
    - Ask a question from the next section to try to move the discussion forward.
    - Have someone else read an important section, quote or verse to get back on track.
    - “That’s a good point but let’s see what else the chapter has to say.”
    - “I’d love to talk about that more another time, but we have so much good stuff to cover here.”
    - “Thank you! I don’t want to miss the chance to talk about \_\_\_\_\_.”
    - “Are you saying \_\_\_\_\_? And let’s see how that relates to the chapter.”
- No one is prepared
    - Be prepared to summarize the sections and main points.
    - Have some key sections underlined that you can ask others to read aloud.
    - As you review each section, ask people to share what they think about the ideas presented therein.
    - Give people a few extra minutes to think about the questions and then ask them to share their answers.
    - Perhaps there is a reason no one is prepared. Address any underlying issues.
    - Send a quick email or two during the week to point out interesting topics from the chapter and encourage your group to dig into the material.
    - Send a brief email during the week and mention a topic from the chapter, asking the people think on a certain question as they prepare for group.
- Someone who is difficult or argumentative:
    - Theological debate is not the purpose of these studies. Don’t engage!
    - If they disagree fundamentally, offer to meet with them outside the group or suggest they contact a

- staff member at Grace to continue the conversation.
- For someone who is clearly a problem, confront them privately and do it in love.
- The group discussion stays shallow
  - Be willing to show vulnerability. Be intentional about sharing something personal. Show that you don't have it all together.
  - Choose increasingly revealing icebreakers and ask everyone to share.
- The group dwindles to a few
  - Reach out to members who are not attending with a call, text or email. Encourage them to come back!
  - Look at this as an opportunity to have more in depth conversation with those you are coming. Some of the best groups are small.
  - In some situations, the group may need to disband and restart in another group.
- The group is just not clicking
  - God knew exactly who would be in your group and He did not make a mistake!
  - Try adding some social time at the beginning of the meeting.
  - Try a fun icebreaker that gets everyone laughing, like a funny clip on Youtube. Have everyone share what makes them laugh out loud.
  - Not every group will end up as best friends. Accept that but also remember that God is at work in every group.
- Where to go for/how to handle problems beyond the scope of the group
  - Pray for wisdom.
  - Acknowledge the problem and show compassion.
  - If you feel led, stop and pray about the situation right away.
  - Thank them for being transparent and sharing. Tell them that you want to further discuss the situation outside of the group.
  - Ask him/her if she has shared this information with others. Where are they seeking help now? Are they seeing a counselor?
  - Connect him/her to the Campus pastor or other Grace staff for further assessment. Grace has resources to direct him/her to appropriate care for help and healing.