

**the
answer
book**

for small group leaders

randall g. neighbour

The Answer Book for Small Group Leaders is an updated, edited version of *Answers to Your Cell Group Questions* by Randall G. Neighbour

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Introduction

A small group leader once asked me, “What is the most memorable thing that has happened to you in a group meeting?”

My worst small group experience was when, as an ice breaker, my group members were asked to share how I could be a better leader. I didn't mind the constructive criticism, but having all of them gang up on me without a hint of it coming on was a very large pill to swallow. That night, I learned a lot about myself and an important lesson: Don't give a disgruntled member the opportunity to create their own icebreaker for your group without discussing it with you beforehand!

The next most memorable meeting would be when a recently-released prison inmate visited our group. Halfway through the meeting, he stood up to put his fist in the face of another small group member over a comment taken the wrong way. Instead of helping me break up the fight, my apprentice shouted, “Praise God, we've broken through to the conflict stage!”

My funniest small group memory is of an

older apprentice in my group who fell asleep during prayer time. When he started snoring loudly, we all slipped out of the room one by one. He woke up when he heard our laughter in the kitchen and was a little too embarrassed to join us.

The best small group meeting I've experienced was when a good friend gave his heart to Jesus. I asked him if we could hold hands while he prayed the "sinner's prayer." Being so new to Christianity, he asked if holding my hand was mandatory for it to work. I told him he didn't have to hold hands with me, but it would keep me from running around the room from excitement! What a great night.

Leading a small group has been the most rewarding thing I've ever done in ministry. Since the late 1970's, I've led a small group of believers to love God, one another, and a lost world. It has pushed me to serve others selflessly, and increased my prayer life for people and problems I can't fix.

When I see my small group members realize their potential by leading friends to Christ and then move into leadership, I know I've done something important. This is the pinnacle of success for me.

As I travel and speak about small group life and leadership, people ask me to address specific questions that come up in their groups. Most of the questions have common themes or origins. While my answers are by no means authoritative, I've been a small group leader long enough to have faced most of the typical problems and I've found solutions.

Much of the advice I share in this book is based on personal trial and error. If failure is indeed the best teacher, I'm the most educated small group leader on the planet!

Hopefully, the answers I have provided here will challenge you to go deeper into leading your group the way Jesus would lead it. If an answer doesn't go far enough or work for your particular group, you'll need to do what I do—ask God for the answer. He has always been faithful to direct my words and attitudes, or put me in the path of someone who can help, like a coach or pastor.

If you have questions not answered here, feel free to contact me for an answer ... your questions might show up in a second book. (You can find my ministry's address and my personal e-mail address on the copyright page.)



Meeting Dynamics

SMALL GROUP AGENDAS

Question:

Some weeks, I have no idea what to do with my group. Do you have any helpful tips?

Answer:

There are lots of creative ways to get people talking and ministering to each other in upcoming meetings!

1. Listen carefully during your pastor's sermon this week and write out a few discussion questions. First, write down the scripture reference and the title of the sermon. Jot down a few

notes about the main points. (Sometimes sermons have unusual titles!)

Try writing discussion questions as you sit in the weekly service. This will keep you focused on your pastor's sermon and if you're like me, keep you alert.

First, write a closed-ended question to help everyone in the group focus on the verse you are discussing. A closed-ended question is one that usually has only one right answer, that is drawn from the scripture passage.

Then, write a standard question that varies from week to week, but sounds something like, "Can anyone illustrate what we're talking about from your own life?" This gets members sharing their past experiences, good and bad.

Next, write a ministry question that challenges your members to take full ownership of what you are discussing. An example of a ministry question would be, "According to this passage, what do you need to change in your life to live out this scripture?" (Please note that when you ask tough questions like this, there will no doubt be a period of silence in the room. Your members need quiet time to hear God's still small voice. They also need time to

work up the nerve to share. Let the room stay quiet and pray for your members silently. As each person shares, ask others if they would be willing to pray for the person and give the person who shared an opportunity to pray as well.)

Then, write a question that will bring your group to a time where you plan, pray, and discuss your purposes in life. One of those purposes is to be salt and light to our world, so discussing ways to overlap your lives with unchurched people based on the sermon would be excellent.

As often as you can, pray for lost people with whom you work, play, or live. Take time to discuss which of your small group members has the most lost friends. Then make a plan as a group to connect with them by hosting a barbeque, going to a ball game together, or just hanging out at one of your members' homes to watch a movie one Friday night.

2. Invest in the newest edition of the *Serendipity Bible for Study Groups* by Zondervan. This is an invaluable source of questions for every chapter of the Bible, which I use often to expand on what my pastor preaches about each week. It has good icebreakers, thought-

provoking questions, and it's doctrinally sound.

The only thing you have to remember when using the questions found in this unique tool is that it's primarily designed for Bible study groups. Using all the questions as they appear in the margins may not lead your group into transparent sharing and ministry to one another through prayer. So, when using this tool be prepared to adapt the questions to fit the mission of your small group.

3. Head over to your local Christian bookstore. There you will find numerous books of small group lessons that are well-written. Ensure you spend enough time reviewing them to determine if they will truly move your group into ministry to one another and the lost world versus a topical Bible study. If they're close to what you need, you can always adapt the questions.
4. Be sure to let your pastor know you're stuck and need help. Lots of pastors provide a weekly guide for their small groups and your pastor may be able to do this for you.

BIBLE STUDIES

Question:

My small group pastor discourages Bible study during our weekly meetings. Why?

Answer:

Your small group is a time when people should gather to enter into God's presence, power, and purpose. While a Bible study is a wonderful thing to do, the meeting isn't the place to dive into God's Word and get lost in the deeper understanding of a passage for the sake of additional knowledge. Bible studies, when done right, are led by gifted teachers who do most of the talking—which is obviously not the goal of

your group if your pastor challenged you not to turn the meetings into Bible studies.

Your group is based on relationships, interaction, and the use of God's Word as a measuring stick and application guide for the members.

Now this doesn't mean that a grounding in God's Word is not vital to the success of your church and small group! Your senior pastor is a godly person who spends hours every week preparing a message for your corporate gathering. He has probably been to seminary and has a firm understanding of the Old and New Testaments, interpreting scripture accurately.

Your weekly small group agenda may be designed from his message text. If so, you have learned a biblical truth on Sunday and you are *applying* that truth to your lives during your meeting. See the difference?

Your small group is a great place where you can help one another *live out* what you're learning. You can apply it powerfully in the midst of authentic biblical community.

MEMBER INVOLVEMENT

Question:

How can I involve more of my members in the weekly meeting?

Answer:

A seasoned leader will delegate the various aspects of a small group gathering to responsible members each week. Just so you'll know, in at least one weekly meeting per month, I give away all the parts of the meeting to others.

I also regularly break up the big group into sub-groups after a time of worship together to discuss the agenda questions and pray for one

another. You will find that quiet people will share in smaller groups, and dominant people will not be as bold.

The important thing is to mix it up week after week to keep it interesting and draw out everyone. Move into women's and men's groups one week. The next week break up into triads (groups of three). See how this will change group dynamics and involve everyone?

By delegating parts of the meeting to others and breaking up into sub-groups, the load is shared by many and becomes a joy, not a burden. A high level of communication is necessary between meetings to do what I am suggesting. When you (and your group) become accustomed to sharing the various parts of your meeting, it becomes a lot of fun and increases group ownership.

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