Praise for

How to Lead a GREAT Small Group Meeting

“Comiskey has hit one out of the park! This book will not collect dust on my bookshelf! I'll use it over and over again as a reference tool in the groups I lead and oversee. And I plan to have every one of my group leaders read it as well.”

MIKE MACK
Founder, smallgroups.com
Small Groups Pastor, Northeast Christian Church

“Only when the Holy Spirit touches a person’s heart in the safe environment of a well planned small group meeting do we truly see the incredible plan in which God has invited us to participate. In How To Lead A Great Small Group Meeting, Joel has captured the essence of leading life-changing small group meetings and given us a practical road map to success!”

THOM CORRIGAN
Pastor, Founder - Pilgrimage Training
Author of Experiencing Community

“Wow! This book taught this old dog a few new tricks. I read this book and immediately made two changes in my facilitation style.

Joel, thanks for the tips!”

RANDALL NEIGHBOUR
Senior Editor, CellGroup Journal

“If you've ever led a small group meeting, you'll find yourself nodding in agreement with Comiskey's honest struggles and helpful advice. Without being overly simplistic, Joel synthesizes the many parts of leading a small group meeting. As a small group leader and trainer I've waited a long time for a tool like this.”

TOM BRUNNER
Senior Pastor, Hope Church

“Joel Comiskey is one of the world’s leading authorities on the subject of small group ministry. Because he writes from an experiential rather than theoretical perspective, he offers valuable insights that can transform your small group ministry into a great ministry. This book is required reading for every group leader and pastor who desires to lead an effective ministry in their church.”

TERRY CANTRELL
Sr. Pastor, Wesleyan Fellowship
Praise for

How to Lead a GREAT Small Group Meeting

“This practical, down-to-earth, user-friendly manual makes it easy for any group leader to apply these insights immediately. I highly recommend it!”

LARRY KREIDER
International Director, DOVE Christian Fellowship International

“Comiskey hits all of the basics of leading a successful small group. This practical manual is a ‘must-read’ for emerging leaders and a great refresher for those who are already leading a group. Coaches can use this resource as a discussion starter when they meet with their group of leaders.”

JEANNETTE BULLER
Author, CoachNet, Inc.

“Joel Comiskey’s latest book should be placed in the hands of all who desire to effectively facilitate a small group. It is a collection of suggestions gleaned from surveying many experienced leaders.”

DR. RALPH W. NEIGHBOUR, JR.

“While reading Joel Comiskey’s book, I kept picturing our leaders in a lively discussion during a training event. We’ve needed a great resource that teaches small group dynamics while casting a vision for authentic small group leadership. It’s evident Joel is a practitioner of community life . . . he knows our world of ministry.”

KERRY BOWMAN
Senior Pastor, Eagle Alliance Church

“Every small group leader needs this ready-to-use resource. Whether you are a novice or a seasoned veteran, you will find practical guidance for yourself and those you train. I highly recommend this book.”

BOB LOGAN
Executive Director, CoachNet, Inc.

“Among the many enthusiastic books written about small groups, there is almost nothing written about the meeting itself. I thank God for this excellent book. Let’s get it into the hands of every small group leader. There are valuable insights in it for everyone.”

JIM EGLI
Small Group Pastor, The Vineyard Church, Champaign, IL
How to Lead a GREAT Small Group Meeting
How to Lead a GREAT Small Group Meeting . . . So People Want to Come Back

JOEL COMISKEY

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I especially want to thank my wife and children for their encouragement to me throughout the writing of this book.
Contents

Introduction .................................................................11

Chapter One
A PURE HEART:
PREPARE YOURSELF ...............................................21

Chapter Two
GATHERING ARMS:
HOW TO STRUCTURE A MEETING .................................29

Chapter Three
LEGS THAT SUPPORT:
FACILITATING OTHERS ............................................43

Chapter Four
AN OPEN SOUL:
PRACTICING TRANSPARENCY ....................................53

Chapter Five
AN INQUISITIVE MIND:
ASKING STIMULATING QUESTIONS ..............................63

Chapter Six
LISTENING EARS ....................................................73
Silence. Jerry's attempt to stimulate discussion failed. “Is there anyone else who’d like to comment on this verse?” Still no response. Jerry decided it was best to break the silence by launching into a spontaneous comment about a few Bible passages. “At least they’re receiving God’s Word,” he assured himself.

I know how this leader felt. I’ve faced similar periods of strained silence as I led the lessons in my own small group. More than once I’ve thought to myself, “Why are my own discussion times so dry? What’s the missing link?”

Many small group leaders, immersed in the battle, begin to doubt their talent and leadership skills. They blame their personality or an apparent lack of gifting for the barren lessons, the uneasiness in the group, and the fact that only a few people participate.

The good news is that the vast majority of small group problems are solvable. I’ve written this book to help you turn a dry gathering into a dynamic meeting.

Small Group Interest

Seventy-five million adult Americans regularly attend a small group (not including all the teenagers and children in groups). There are 300,000 churches in the U.S., but more than three million small groups.¹

With the interest in small groups mounting, especially in the face of an impersonal internet society, the need is great to understand the dynamics of small groups (both to participate in as well as to lead). Lyle Schaller, after listing 20 innovations in the modern U.S. church, says, “The decision by tens of millions of teenagers and adults to place a high personal priority on weekly participation in serious, in-depth, lay-led, and continuing Bible study and prayer groups is perhaps the most important of all.”²
The small group phenomenon is certainly not limited to the U.S. The largest church in the history of Christianity, Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, is based on 25,000 small groups. The largest churches in the world, following the example of YFGC, are also based on small groups.3

Most secular organizations now hold regular small-group meetings, from boards to task forces. Knowing how to lead such meetings not only sweetens the atmosphere, but it often determines business success or failure.

In fact, small-group dynamics is a science in its own right. One of my first college courses covered it as we worked through the book Effective Group Discussion. We learned how to actively listen, respond positively, summarize, and many other small group skills.4

While secular organizations seek to increase productivity through small group dynamics, God’s purposes must guide the Christian small group. Effective small group leaders live under the power of the Holy Spirit and communicate God’s purposes for the group. The Christian leader will become more effective and more fully meet the needs of group members by learning the skills of small group dynamics.

**Definition of a Small Group**

Some experts choose the broad path and define a small group as anything small that meets as a group. This definition is so inclusive (and elusive) that it doesn’t clarify anything. The communists as well as liberation theologians promote their brand of cells. Across the land, various types of groups are forming to heal physical disorders, chemical dependency, marital problems — and the list continues. With this broad definition, you could include a family, a classroom, church board meeting, a basketball team, and a Christian small group. Defining a small group by its size doesn’t clarify the purpose of the group.

I define a small group as a group of people (4-15), who meet regularly for the purpose of spiritual edification and evangelistic outreach (with the goal of multiplication), who are committed to participate in the functions of the local church.

I realize that many small groups are not connected to the local church. If you’re leading such a group, this book will help you fine-tune your skills. But our focus is on church-based small groups.

When defining a small group, it’s important to identify essential components or characteristics that should be present. Life-changing small groups should have the following characteristics:
Introduction

➤ Upward Focus: Knowing God
➤ Inward Focus: Knowing each other
➤ Outward Focus: Reaching out to those who don’t know Jesus (with the goal of multiplying the small group)
➤ Forward Focus: Raising up new leaders

Small groups should be consistent, yet flexible. Some groups, for example, might be more “seeker-sensitive” than others. Excessive singing and prayer wouldn’t be appropriate in such meetings. Our church has many groups that meet on university campuses. The leaders purposely try to maintain a flavor that’s appropriate in that context, since the main thrust is evangelistic. Yet, even in these groups, the components of knowing God and relationship-building are present.

No two small groups are exactly alike, but each group maintains the same components: seeking God (upward focus); developing relationships with one another (inward focus); reaching out to non-Christians (outward focus); and developing new leaders (forward focus). These components allow cells the flexibility to be effective, while at the same time achieving their goal.

Keep the Group Small

Bigger is not better for small groups. Growth in size excludes growth in intimacy. Unless cells remain small, they lose their effectiveness and ability to care for the needs of each member. When two people are in conversation, there are two communication lines; that number increases to 12 when four are present. With ten people, the number grows to 90, and when 15 people gather, there are 210 lines of communication. After 15 persons, there is no longer an opportunity for people to know each other intimately. It’s a congregation, rather than a small group.

But how big is too big? One small group church discovered ten was the maximum size. Carl George agrees, emphatically declaring that ten is “. . . the time-tested, scientifically validated size that allows for optimal communication.”

John Mallison, however, finds room for a few more. He says, “Twelve not only sets the upper limit for meaningful relationships, but provides a non-threatening situation for those who are new to small group experiences . . . It is significant that Jesus chose twelve men to be in his group.” Striking a balance, Dale Galloway says, “The ideal number for good group dynamics and for caring and dialogue is somewhere between
Introduction

What a Small Group is Not

Sometimes we understand something better when we realize what it is not. The following constitutes erroneous thinking about the small group:

➤ **Club Status**
   Although you might focus on a homogeneous group, remember that your small group must continue to grow and eventually multiply. Don’t allow homogeneity to become an end in itself.

➤ **A Clique**
   Small groups are wonderful because they move people into deep community. At the same time, we must always include others in our community since Christ has given us a commission to make disciples.

➤ **An Organization**
   This is a deadly trap. A small group is a *living organism* rather than simply a nice way to organize the body of Christ. A small group needs to function as a living part of Christ’s body.

➤ **Static**
   Cells in the human body that don’t multiply will die. One small group guru told me that “small groups are born to die.” I disagree. I believe that small groups are born to multiply. Yet, if a group does not multiply, it will die, and for this reason, a small group must continually reproduce itself.

➤ **One Day a Week**
   The small group is far more than another weekly meeting. It’s a family. During the week, the members should pastor one another, care for one another, and befriend each other. I’ve discovered that small group members often look for each other during the Sunday celebration time and even sit together. In one small group-driven church that I visited, each group was encouraged to meet together after the Sunday morning service for fellowship, accountability, and to plan for the next week.

➤ **A Classroom**
   I visited one small group in which the leader assumed the role as the Bible answer man. The meeting centered around the Bible guru (small group leader) who taught the unlearned (rest of small group members). The small group leader, rather, is a facilitator/shepherd, who guides the lesson while stimulating others to share.
eight and twelve. Participation is much greater when you stay within those numbers.”

Galloway’s advice not only sounds reasonable, but it also rings true with my own experience. Certainly a group should not grow beyond fifteen people, nor have fewer than five (with the possible exception of newly planted groups).

Communication Lines

\[ N \times N - N = \text{Communication Lines} \]

\[ 2 \times 2 - 2 = 2 \]
\[ 4 \times 4 - 4 = 12 \]
\[ 15 \times 15 - 15 = 210 \]
Visualizing the Small Group Meeting

The pictures on the opposite page will help you visualize the skills you need to lead a great small group meeting. In order for your physical body to work properly, all of the individual parts must work together. The same is true of the small group meeting. Some small group leaders have great eyes, but have no soul. Others are all mouth, with no ears. But when all the parts are working, the meeting will flow. Each chapter in this book corresponds to a different body part.

➤ Chapter One - A Pure Heart: Prepare Yourself

➤ Chapter Two - Gathering Arms: How to Structure a Meeting

➤ Chapter Three - Legs that Support: Facilitating Others

➤ Chapter Four - An Open Soul: Practicing Transparency

➤ Chapter Five - An Inquisitive Mind: Asking Stimulating Questions

➤ Chapter Six - Listening Ears

➤ Chapter Seven - An Encouraging Tongue

➤ Chapter Eight - Warm Hands: Reaching Out to Non-Christians

➤ Chapter Nine - Walking Together: Moving Through the Stages of Life

➤ Chapter Ten - Eyes That See the Details
There are several different ways that this book can be used:

1. Start at the beginning and read the entire book to get a complete picture of leading a great small group meeting. This is an excellent way to overview the basic skills or to sharpen the skills that you already have.

2. Skip to the chapter that addresses the areas where you need specific development. If you need help asking good questions, then feel free to turn to chapter five. If you are not sure how to include non-Christians in your group, then chapter eight will prove helpful.

3. Skim the book for helpful ideas and tips that you can use in your meeting. You will see many of these in the lists and in the sidebars.
4. Read through the book with other small group leaders and discuss what you are learning. You might even do this as a part of your small group leader training with your pastor.

**Unique Features of This Book**

Throughout the book you will find tips and practical advice that will help you understand the principles of a great meeting and show you how to implement them in your group. You will find these special tips in these sidebars:

- **Try This!**
  Find these for simple ideas and tidbits that you can implement this week. Some of them are so obvious that you will wonder why you didn’t think of them yourself.

- **Strategy**
  Sometimes you need a new way of doing things to get out of a rut. These proven strategies provide practical ways to break out and do something new in your group.

- **Insight**
  These explanations will show you the inside track of being a great small group leader with testimonies, stories, and quotes from the lives of experienced leaders.

- **Dictionary**
  Small group leadership is not difficult, but sometimes we misunderstand what it really involves. Look for these sidebars to make sure that you are on the same page with what really makes a small group great.
A Companion Tool

How to Lead a Great Small Group Meeting will help you effectively guide your weekly meeting. But what do effective leaders do between the meetings? I have written a companion resource called Home Cell Group Explosion: How Your Small Group Can Grow and Multiply which explains what effective small group leaders do during the other six days and 22 hours. These two volumes work hand-in-hand to help you fully enter the ministry God has set before you.

If you’ve enjoyed this sample, buy the book! It’s available through TOUCH Publications at 800-735-5865 or you can order it online at www.touchusa.org.