



Ongoing Challenges in the Small Groups

Suggestions for Small Group Facilitators to use to manage the common challenges that arise in the Small Groups

A thought for all Small Group Facilitators and all in Ministry to remember:

“Love is patient. It is kind. It forbears all things. It loves all things...” (1 Corinthians 14:4-7) This is the love God calls us to in The Cornerstone. If, in the Small Groups, we keep exactly to the time, ensure that no one refers to the commentaries, assure that all of the questions are answered, and make sure that everyone gets a turn, but we do not act lovingly, then we do have not have love.

CHALLENGING PEOPLE:

1. The Person Who Dominates

Dominators are people who have so many thoughts, insights and stories that they just can't seem to keep quiet. Usually these people are very excited about The Cornerstone and about the Lord, and you do not want to stifle their spirit.

In order to handle this challenge, the Small Group Facilitator should set the stage early in the year by discussing with the group the importance of staying on schedule in order to cover the entire lesson. You might tell the group with humor, "Please help me to stay on the time schedule and don't be offended if I say we need to wrap it up." Perhaps there could be an agreed upon hand signal that the Facilitator or Alternate can use to keep things moving. Some Facilitators use their Alternate as the timekeeper and the group knows this is his/her job. The Alternate might tell the group (with humor), *"I'm sorry, but it is my job to be a drill sergeant and we need to keep the group moving."* This should be reinforced throughout the year.

Following are some other phrases you might use - remembering that your tone of voice should be respectful and kind.

- *"Okay folks—we're are getting off track."*
- *"Maybe we can come back to that later if we have time."*
- *"Those are great ideas - Let's see what some of the others have on their papers."*
- *"I'm really sorry to have to cut you off; this is really interesting, let's mark it down, so that you can tell us the rest of the story at our fellowship/social."*

Additional suggestions:

- ALWAYS PRAY about the situation. Also ask your Co-Facilitator, your Alternate and the Branch Facilitators for their PRAYER SUPPORT.
- Seek feedback and suggestions from other Small Group Facilitators.
- If the behavior persists, take the person aside before or after the Small Group session to discuss the situation; never embarrass a member in front of the group. Suggest the person star one or two Connection Questions to share with the group and to refrain from sharing on others.

There may be a time when nothing works. The Small Group Facilitator would then talk to the Branch Facilitator(s), asking them to pray and help discern a solution for this problem.

2. The Person Who Rambles

The Rambler is someone who veers off into topics different from those addressed in the Study Questions. Again, set boundaries in the beginning of the year. Tell your group that they will be sharing the answers that came to mind during prayerful study at home and not what pops into their heads during the session. The rationale for this should be stressed with the group and possibly discussed with this individual privately. This issue can also be dealt with humorously through the year.

3. The Person Who Is Shy or Hesitant

There will be people who are shy or hesitant to share in the Small Group session. Strive to make these individuals comfortable by affirming the answers they do offer. At some point you might ask if there is anything they could add to a question that has been answered. You could write a note, send an email or call to encourage them during the week.

4. The Person Who Is the Authority

Authoritarians are people who have very strong opinions and feel qualified to speak adamantly and with great authority on many subjects. They will refute, instruct and correct those who don't share their knowledge or opinions. While it is normal to have differing opinions, the Small Group is not a place to debate those topics. Harshness and judging others' viewpoints is not an option. The point should be made that members must respect each other's opinions even if they don't agree. Stress that the objective of sharing answers in the Small Group is to deepen faith and grow in love for God and for one another.

At the first session and throughout the year the Small Group Facilitator will emphasize that the small group is not a place to debate politics, argue about controversial issues or make judgments about persons' values or lifestyles. You must curb all harsh or judgmental comments as quickly as possible and then try to counteract any adverse effects on the other members. When this situation occurs, the following or similar responses might be helpful.

- *"No fair, we are getting into politics." (lightly and humorously)*
- *"There are a lot of reasons that people make the choices they do. We need to move on."*
- *"We need to keep in mind that some people have differing opinions about this."*
- *"As each generation comes along, people can tend to think different ways."*
- *"We aren't here to solve this."*

5. The Person Who Has Missed The Point Of The Question

There will be times when a person's answer to the question is obviously not the correct answer. Even if the answer has nothing to do with the question, realize that this may be the answer the person needed to hear; the Small Group Facilitator should respect this. You can thank the person for their answer and then respond:

- *"Would anyone like to share another answer for this question?"*
- *"Did anyone else have another translation for this question?"*
- *"I may have been off the mark on this, but I had another answer."*

The important thing is to be diplomatic - to not make it seem like a put-down or make a person feel foolish.

Although it is stressed that there are no right or wrong answers, there are ones that more correctly answer the question being asked. The Small Group Facilitator should make sure that the group hears the "correct" answer to every question.

6. The Person Whose Problems Need Solving

There will be members who persist in sharing inappropriate personal problems with the Small Group and seeking advice and/or solutions. It is important to remember that the Small Group meeting is not a counseling session, the purpose is not to solve problems. Using tact and empathy, acknowledge the member's distress, and then move the group on. Following are some suggestions you might try.

- Give empathetic assurance that the group will pray for the individual and the situation.
- Offer to talk with the person after the session.
- Ask the Co-Facilitator or Alternate to take the person to a private place away from the group to talk.
- Stop, offer a short prayer for the person and then go on with the session.
- Encourage the individual to seek help from a counselor, priest or therapist.

7. The Person Who Continually Refers to Commentaries and Other Sources

These persons are usually very excited, inspired about ₂insights they have learned from a commentary or

outside source, truly believing it will be of value and interest to others in the group. They should not be discouraged but their enthusiasm channeled.

Tell the group in the beginning of the year that they are asked to not use commentaries when completing the lesson. Explain that the answers to the Study Questions should be personal and written during their personal and prayerful study times with God rather than from a commentator or theologian. Assure them that it is appropriate to do additional reading after the lesson is completed, but the information gleaned should be shared only sparingly in the Small Group session and is more appropriately shared outside the meeting time. Periodic reminders may be necessary. If members do not seem to get the message, the Facilitator or Alternate can take them aside and readdress the reasons behind this guideline.

8. The Person Who Often Comes Without Completing the Lesson

When individuals often come to the group unprepared, it may indicate that they are struggling with the lessons or have issues with time constraints. Appreciate the fact that they are coming to the Small Group but try to discover the underlying problem. The Small Group Facilitator should contact these persons between sessions to see how they are doing. Ask how things are going at The Cornerstone. New members need to know that it is not unusual for persons to struggle a bit at first. They often feel that their answers won't be right or that everyone else is smarter or more spiritual. They struggle to set aside time to complete the lessons on a daily basis. These persons should be encouraged and reassured that the study will get easier as time goes by. You can assure them that as the daily study time becomes a habit and they will come to see many blessings and benefits. Advise the individuals to pray and tell them that you will be praying too. Keep in periodic contact with those in the group who struggle.

Someone once said that the most important person in the small group—the one who should be given the most time and love and attention—is the *one* who is having the most struggle. (Matthew 18:12) *"If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine...and go and search for the one?"*

9. The Person Who Is Often Absent

As the year progresses, the Small Group becomes like a family. Therefore, when someone is not present, that person is missed and it affects the entire group. Talk about this with the group from time to time throughout the year, especially if absences become a problem. This is also something that the Branch Facilitator should address with the entire branch early in the year.

When members miss several sessions, the Small Group Facilitator should call them to let them know they were missed, encourage them to return and offer prayers as needed. Many times you will find that these people are experiencing problems and appreciate the concern. Ask if they would like for the Small Group to pray about the situation. This offers an opportunity for the group to support one another in prayer and can bond them together. Sometimes members who have been absent just need a bit of encouragement to come back to the meetings. The Small Group Facilitators and Alternates should continually pray for good attendance for the entire group and especially for those who often miss the sessions.

CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

1. When Only Certain People Are Answering Connection Questions

The Small Group Facilitator(s) should encourage all the members to share their answers to the Connection Questions. Remind the group that every answer is valuable and it is hoped that everyone will choose to share in the Small Group. You could suggest that members make a notation each week on one or two of the Connection Questions that they would be willing to share. Ask those who often share to give others a chance to volunteer before jumping in to answer a Connection Question.

2. When the Group Veers off into a Discussion

If the group is veering off into a discussion, the Facilitator quickly needs to focus them back to the question. This should be done in a firm, yet light-hearted way. There is a balance between being harsh and inflexible and being ineffective and lax. Statements like: *"Goodness, we are really way off track...Let's get back to the question,"* will usually be effective. Also, humor can be used to direct members back on topic.

3. When Confidentiality Is Not Respected

To encourage personal sharing, an atmosphere of

trust must be established among group members. Confidentiality is an absolute must if this is to be accomplished. The Small Group Facilitator should present this concept to the group at the very first session with periodic reminders: *"What we say in the group—stays in the group."* If there is ever a breach of confidentiality, the Small Group Facilitator must address the problem immediately. You should review the guidelines about confidentiality with the group in a general way, then take those involved aside and address the issue in private.

4. When Time Becomes a Problem

Since time is of the essence and management of time in the Small Group is essential to the overall flow of the branch session, the Small Group Facilitator should plan a method to use for time control.

- Use the suggested schedule for the branch session to allow time to cover all the questions in the lessons during the allotted time. Noting the time in the margins of your lesson that each day's questions should begin can be helpful. For example, beside DAY ONE write the time you will begin; beside DAY TWO write the time you should begin. Beside DAY THREE, etc. Remember, this is a wonderful guideline but you should never be inflexible.
- Establish an understanding with the Co-Facilitator or Alternate that he/she will keep be the timekeeper and help keep things moving.
- Pray with the group about the time at the beginning of the Small Group session to get the lesson done in a timely manner.

It is always in the Spirit of God's love that you are to confront challenges that arise in the Small Group. Small Group Facilitators should always keep in mind their goals for the Small Groups: to create a bond of Christian love among the members, to provide an opportunity for members to share their faith and study God's Word in the group setting and to manage the time so the sharing flows, the lesson is covered in its entirety, there is time for shared prayer and the session does not extend beyond the time allotment.