

# Small Group Facilitator Toolkit

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Congratulations!

Chances are you are consulting this resource because you are facilitating a small group or considering it. We are so glad that you are engaging in this important ministry. No doubt you will be blessed and shaped by God through this opportunity.

Helping a small group flourish into a meaningful community of discipleship is a wonderful and sometimes challenging task. Building a community of friends is not something that is necessarily tangible or automatic. While there are practices we can model to form a well-rounded group, how and when it happens is somewhat mysterious. But one thing we can be sure of: the Spirit is at work in and through you and other members of your small group--and that is a beautiful mystery!

In this Toolkit you will find lots of useful information to assist your small group: group agreements (which are essential), approaches to prayer, dealing with difficult situations, tips for family small groups, serving, celebrating and much more. These topics are relevant whether you are just starting out or have been involved in small groups for years. There's a lot here, so take a look at the table of contents and read first the sections that seem most relevant to you and your group now. If you are starting a new group, be sure to read "The Five Purposes" and "Small Group Agreements."

As always, we'd love to be of assistance to you, so please don't hesitate to contact me or Sarah Campbell to share a great story, an idea or a struggle you are experiencing. We are committed to supporting and praying for all those who are leading small groups.

May you know the abundant life to which Jesus Christ calls us.

With joy,



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# Five Purposes of Life-Changing Groups

By George Hinman, Senior Pastor

The Five Purposes are guidelines for developing a group that changes lives of group members and the people around them. We encourage all small groups to seek to live out each of these purposes to some measure. It is a well-rounded approach to discipleship that helps keep groups vital, growing and focused on God's purpose for them.

- **Study the Word** We are transformed as we reflect and respond to the scriptures together. God's Word prunes us and shapes us into people who will bear fruit.
- **Worship the Lord** Worship is our grateful response to God's relationship with us. In small groups, we can worship by sharing how God is working in our lives, praying together, even singing together.
- **Care for Each Other** By caring we can be a healing agent of the Lord. Listen with love. Pray for each other. Bring a meal when someone is sick. Call folks who miss a meeting to see how they are.
- **Love Our Neighbors** "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." Matthew 25:35. God invites us to serve and love people beyond our group.
- **Relate As Friends** Celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, attend church together, have a barbeque – celebrate life together and God's gift of brothers and sisters in our lives.

**Each group will have different emphases.** A group of choir members will spend more time on "Worshipping the Lord." A mission task force may spend more time on "Love our neighbors." But every kind of group can grow by spending at least some time on each purpose, if not at each meeting, then periodically through the year. Reading Scripture and praying for each other are good to make a priority for every meeting, even if it is for just 5-10 minutes.

**If your group has been meeting for awhile, ask your group:** Which purposes does our group do well? Which purposes could we focus on more?

## The early church met as small groups

In the early days of the "church," as recorded in the book of Acts, there were no church buildings. Instead, believers gathered in homes. People flocked to join the new Christians because they could see how their lives were transforming, how they were filled with a new kind of joy. Take a look at the description of what took place and see how it reflects each of the 5 purposes.

Acts 2:42-47

- They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **Studying the Word, Relating as friends, Worshipping the Lord.**
- Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. **Worshipping the Lord.**
- All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. **Loving their neighbors, Caring for each other.**
- 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 favor of all the people. **Relating as friends, Worshipping the Lord.**
- And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved – **the result of people witnessing transformed lives.**

**Read Acts 2:42-47 together and discuss with your group:** What steps could we take as a group to move toward such a dynamic approach to living out our faith together?

## Small Group Agreements

One of the most helpful ways to ensure a healthy small group focused on its purpose is by creating agreements together when the group begins or adds new members and later reviewing them from time to time to refocus and renew the group.

### Why Have Group Agreements?

- People come to a small group with different expectations, experiences and group skills.
  - Agreements help everyone understand each other, negotiate and get on the same page.
  - Improves group dynamics.
  - Reduces conflict and disappointment.
  - Helps organize group.
  - Can include ideas to strengthen and deepen your group.
  - You can return to existing agreements, or work together to develop new agreements to help resolve issues.
  - Provides a tool to periodically evaluate, strengthen and reenergize your group.
- 

### Our Small Group Agreement

**For new groups, groups welcoming new members or refocusing and energizing ongoing groups.**

Take a few minutes to review these suggestions for an agreement and complete this as a group. Each group is different, so prayerfully adapt the agreement to fit the needs and goals of your group.

Each year, or when the group is going through a rough spot, it is good to revisit the group agreement and ask each other “How are we doing on these agreements?” “What could we strengthen?” “What would we like to change or add to continue our growth as a group focused on Christ?”

**The purpose** of our small group is to follow Christ together, living out the Five Purposes of life changing small groups:

- **Study the Word** We are transformed as we reflect and respond to the scriptures together. God’s Word prunes us and shapes us into people who will bear fruit.
- **Worship the Lord** Worship is our grateful response to God’s relationship with us. In small groups, we can worship by sharing how God is working in our lives, praying together, even singing together.
- **Care for Each Other** By caring we can be a healing agent of the Lord. Listen with love. Pray for each other. Bring a meal when someone is sick. Call folks who miss a meeting to see how they are.
- **Love Our Neighbors** “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” Matthew 25:35. God invites us to serve and love people beyond our group.
- **Relate As Friends** Celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, attend church together, have a barbeque – celebrate life together and God’s gift of brothers and sisters in our lives.

**We agree to commit** to attending the next five meetings and our **Group Celebration** after our first six weeks together (see page 17).

**Facilitator(s)** lead the meeting, draw the others into the discussion by asking questions (rather than teaching) listening (rather than providing answers) and keep the meeting moving and ending on time. Often groups rotate this role each week. These members would like to facilitate: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Host(s)** provide the house where the group meets. Groups can have one host, or rotate hosting. Any size house or apt. is great! Some groups meet quite happily in coffee shops. The host can provide the snack and beverage, or another member can. These members would like to host: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Meetings:** day of week \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ am/pm to \_\_\_\_\_ am/pm

We will honor our fellow group members by arriving on time. We will spend:

\_\_\_\_ minutes gathering, talking, getting food and beverages

\_\_\_\_ minutes singing and/or Bible story time with the kids (*for family small groups with children*)

\_\_\_\_ minutes doing the study

\_\_\_\_ minutes sharing what's going on in the faith journeys and lives of each member

\_\_\_\_ minutes in prayer

**Childcare** (*for family small groups with children*)

After singing and story time with the kids we will:

- A) Share costs for a hired babysitter to care for the kids
- B) Have a parent or two take turns each week caring for the kids.
- C) Allow the children to be with us all the time
- D) Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Our celebration meeting** will be on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ host: \_\_\_\_\_ time \_\_\_\_\_

(See page 17).

#### **Creating a welcoming, safe atmosphere for fellowship**

- **Maintaining confidentiality**
- **Listening well to one another** giving everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard
- **Speaking respectfully** of others.
- **Only providing advice or accountability if invited to do so**, and then gently.

#### **Other ideas to add to your agreement to strengthen and deepen the group**

- Quarterly dinner to allow more time for sharing and conversation
- Annual overnight to share life stories, deepen relationships and facilitate a group evaluation
- Serving others as a group

## Engaging the Whole Group

Sharing the leadership of the group gets everyone involved, builds a sense of ownership, helps prevent burnout and makes group life more fun. It's good for each person in the group to have a role to play. Roles can rotate on a schedule that fits the group. Here are some example roles. Your group may develop their own.

- **Facilitators** – facilitate the meeting, draw members into the conversation, keep the meeting on track.
- **Hosts** – host the meetings in their homes.
- **Shepherd/prayer secretary** – send weekly messages to group members reminding them of the next meeting and send updates.
- **Food** – bring treats for meetings
- **Events** – organize a group dinner, retreat, fun events together
- **Serving together** – plan opportunities to serve and care for others outside the group, and help group members when they are ill, need help moving, etc.

## Listening, Facilitating and Prayer

By Renée Sundberg, Pastor of Community Life

### Ephesians 4: 1-3; 7; 12-16

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love**, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace... each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.... to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for **building up the body of Christ**, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **to maturity**, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children...but **speaking the truth in love**, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the **body’s growth in building itself up in love.** “

### LISTENING IS

...A means of offering support and loving accountability. It is one of the most important ways to care for each other in small groups. Listening well is a learned skill and not easy by any means. If you think you listen well, you are probably not aware of the ways you need to grow. There are always aspects you can develop and deepen as you seek to show the mercy Christ through listening with love.

- **REALLY listening, is powerful**

“Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among most people they meet, not even amongst their close friends. But he who can no longer listen to another has lost contact with life. For life is community and community is relationships and relationships die without communication. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never be really speaking to others; unfortunately, he will not be conscious of it. To listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being performs for another.” - *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*
- **Everyone’s job**

Listening well is a primary way to care for one another in a group—perhaps the most important quality of a group to help make it a safe and welcoming place to share.  
Successful groups commit to actively listen to one another and allow space for each member to be heard.
- **Challenging**

Meaning is conveyed not only through words, but even more through tone of voice and body language. The inner response of the listener can also affect the message heard.  
“The greatest difficulty in listening is what listeners do with the emotions and information that come to their conscious while other persons are telling their stories. The story that comes to your consciousness

when you hear the story of another person is a **counter story**. To tell it is acceptable in social situations, but not when you are dealing with another person's story of pain. One of God's greatest gifts is counter story. Yet that gift can be one of your worst enemies, when it comes to listening. If you use it correctly, it can be to the benefit of the story teller. If you can identify some of the themes in your own story you have a better chance of getting in touch with what is going on with the speaker. So when you are a listener you are not only helping the speaker, the speaker is actually helping you too. "

- John Savage, from *Listening and Caring in Ministry*

Resist giving out advice unless requested.

Same with accountability—and share in gentleness and with care. Focus should be the individual's faith goals, not our goals for them.

The hope is we all want to grow into maturity in Christ and share ourselves with one another. Sometimes things in our lives keep us from that goal. A transformational small group allows us to share with our covenant partners, and, when we are ready, seek their help in our quest for wholeness through Christ's liberating power. This community can help us become what God has designed us for new life.

▪ **The Skill of Silence**

Very important in listening. Let the story spin out. Don't jump in too soon. When the story is finished you can be more active. For deeper place of pain, holding silence is what can be most honoring.

▪ **Life-giving**

Through the power of the life-giving Spirit of God we are invited to engage in honest, care-filled community. Ideally a small group becomes the place where its members can drop the masks of performance and perfection often demanded by our culture, where members can be themselves and be known by others in a spiritually nurturing group.

## **FACILITATING**

...A means of fostering God's work in a group, and keeping the community moving

Stems from listening—to be a good facilitator you need to be a good observer and listener.

### **An effective facilitator**

- Draws people together.
  - Is not an authoritative teacher but encourages people to talk and share.
  - Enables a situation where folks are self-motivated to discover for themselves.
  - Models a style of Christian discipleship that others can follow.
  - Is a fellow-learner and fellow-worker with the group; a fellow servant.
  - Provides learning resources for the group.
- **Sets the stage**
- Set the stage for sharing: confidentiality; not giving advice unless solicited or permission is granted, etc.
- Don't force participation but create an atmosphere that encourages it (believes everyone has something to say worth hearing, draws folks out, warm and understanding).
  - Foster a group environment of acceptance and invite others to contribute.
  - Create an atmosphere of non-judgmental, unconditional love.
- **Upholds the group agreement**
- Keeps things going to uphold the group agreement or covenant (not facilitator's sole responsibility, but takes lead).
  - Keeps time or can assign this to someone else during the meeting. Allows for digressions in midst of crisis or celebration.

- **Leads the discussion**  
Is familiar with the study questions for the week; perhaps has prepared them; or brings the scripture...
- **Rotates lesson facilitation between members**  
A good leader models facilitation and encourages others to take it on. This builds discipleship and leadership skills, develops future leaders for new groups.

## PRAYER

...A means of deepening friendship with God and one another

- **Purpose in small groups**  
Individual prayer enhances your relationship with God—let’s face it, we are most ourselves alone. Group prayer also builds your relationship with God and has some additional purposes:
  - To build up one another
  - To create community
  - For discernment
  - To commission
  - Ministry to sick (James 5:14)
  - To teach us about prayer-to grow
- **Grace and freedom**  
Just be who you are. It is a conversation with God. Group prayer should be conducted with grace and freedom. Everyone in the group isn’t going to express themselves the same way. No one should be forced to pray out loud. There is merit to being together and hearing one another before God. Sometimes when others pray for us, we hear a new perspective, are encouraged and even experience God speaking into the situation and ministering to us through another. Sometimes someone might pray something we don’t agree with, and that can be a place for growth for us.
- **Some approaches**
  - Leader opens and closes (or other individual)
  - Prayer partners for the week (3x5 cards) or send all requests via email
  - Popcorn prayer (spontaneous or share before and pray)
  - Led prayer: ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication)
  - Special moments—drop agenda for the moment and pray; or lay hands on someone and pray
  - Lectio Divina—prayers stem from scripture

I highly recommend some time to pray together at each meeting—it helps develop the group as a worshipping community. And pray individually throughout the week.

*Transformational small groups provide a space where we experience God’s mercy. Our goal is to create conditions where others can flourish.*

## Addressing Group Problems – Don't Wait!

Every group goes through some kind of challenge. The only groups without problems are the ones with no people in them. Some situations can kill a group quickly. When faced with such issues, groups can panic and disband. However, doing this misses the opportunity for the group to grow and sometimes to provide help to individual members that might never receive help if the group dissolves.

If you sense any issues developing, address them right away. Waiting will allow the problem to grow. Not sure what to do? You are not alone. We are here to help you. See the resources, below.

### Resources for support

- Contact [smallgroups@upc.org](mailto:smallgroups@upc.org) or 206-524-7301 x522. Sarah is always glad to talk with you.
- Contact your area Coordinators (visit [www.upc.org/smallgroups/Areas.aspx](http://www.upc.org/smallgroups/Areas.aspx))
- Review this [handout](#)
- Check out the resources on the UPC small group web pages [www.upc.org/smallgroups](http://www.upc.org/smallgroups)
- Take a look at the info for small group facilitators [www.upc.org/smallgroups/facilitators.aspx](http://www.upc.org/smallgroups/facilitators.aspx)
- Subscribe to the monthly Small Group Leader News (e-letter).
  - Contains coming events, current study guides, ideas for serving with your group, tips from other small group leaders.
  - To subscribe, contact [smallgroups@upc.org](mailto:smallgroups@upc.org).

## Healthy Small Groups/Tough Situations

By Tim Snow, UPC Executive Pastor and former head of small groups at UPC

All groups have gifts and weaknesses. It can be a challenge. But most groups can be places of transformation. There are no perfect groups. Some have more challenges than others. We need to come together to work things out.

**Main issues** – communication challenges, things you haven't talked about or worked out

**Goal** – healthy communication through addressing problems.

**Scripture: I John 4:9-12**

*(What small groups are about: God making his love complete/perfected/realized through us.)*

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

**The Foundation of community in small groups** is what the Living God and Christ have done in our lives. Out of this love comes our call to community. Because God loved us, and his love lives within us, we need to love one another and our Lord as he loves us.

It takes work to love each other, especially when things aren't working and need to change.

**Committing to a small group is being deliberate in setting life direction:**

- Committing to exploring Christ at the center of our lives.
- Committing to directing our lives into community with others.

- Committing to live our lives in ministry, starting with those in our small group.

If groups aren't healthy, the group may fall apart or not achieve its spiritual purpose.

### Healthy groups

- Healthy groups are groups that live into the 5 Purposes of Life-Changing Small Groups
- Every group will encounter tough situations
- In healthy groups, every member looks for a way to love and minister to each of the other members

### How do we love each other in tough situations?

- **We have to be able to talk about the tough stuff**
  - Periodically talk about group dynamics. How are we doing against 5 Purposes? How are we feeling about how the group is going? How could we do better?
  - What purpose is being defeated in our group?
- **Get folks to own the problem**
  - "I would love to hear from everyone but we don't seem to get there."
  - "If we have Bible study we don't seem to get to sharing, if we share first we don't have time for bible study."
  - How can we address this in the way we do the group?
- **Face the problem: Style is very important. We want to be a CARING community.**
  - Speak the truth in love – but there are different ways to do that. Court room vs. coffee talk. Not a cross examination or accusation. Instead like a coffee talk. See each other as on the same team. What are we observing that we own together? What would we like to see better? How can we get there? It's never going to be perfect. Work on the chronic issues.
- **Develop solutions**
  - **Kitchen timer.** Gives each person a timeframe without a specific person being responsible to cut someone off. Hard to cut someone off because you want to be caring community. Easy to forget how long you are speaking.
  - **Raise your hand.** If the discussion is going off topic, or if someone is talking too long, raise your hand and gently redirect the conversation by saying something like "Thank you very much for all you have said. I want to make sure we get through everything tonight/give everyone a chance to talk."
  - **Ask folks who are having problems to help take ownership of the problems – giving assignments.** "I need your help to make sure that everyone gets 5 minutes each to share. Can you help me keep track of that?"
  - **One-on-one conversations** - Meet over coffee or casual conversation, to help solve the problem. Work toward them taking ownership.
  - **Be honest, respectful, caring. We need to have the conversations.** Groups die from unaddressed problems. If someone isn't coming, you may not know why. Might have a one-on-one.
  - **Get some consultation help from UPC's Small Group Ministry.** Ask someone knowledgeable outside the group for helpful ideas.

### Seven Common Characters:

- **The Dominator** – Monopolizes conversation. May not be aware of it. Comments on everything. Unintentionally or intentionally controls the conversation. May constantly talk about their own needs.
- **The Silent Passive** – Unwilling to share. May be hurt, offended, or shy. Shares only superficially, perhaps because they got unwanted advice from the group when they just needed someone to listen.
- **The Advice Giver** – Wants people to feel better. Ready to help, even if not asked. Wants to fix problems. Means to be caring, but comes across as not listening. Most people just want someone to listen, empathize and pray, not give advice unless asked. Unasked advice makes them feel like projects, judged, or inadequate. To intervene during advice, you can say, "So, Bill, are you asking for advice?"

- **The Distracter** - Changes the subject. Constant joking. Trivial tangents. Takes discussions off subject, which disrupts meetings and makes people feel the Distracter isn't listening. Uses text as springboard for something else not related to meaning or focus of lesson. What people want is someone who listens and really tries to understand what people are saying and the meaning of the Scripture.
- **The Dictator** – Into control. Likes to direct the group. Okay if benevolent, wants to care for others, like a facilitator. But a facilitator is a servant not a controller. Dictator does not negotiate. Knows the way things “need” to go. Likes to set rules.
- **The Needer** – Going through such deep trauma they can't help but bring that to the group and it takes all the attention and energy of the group. If not addressed quickly, people may leave the group one by one because it's overwhelming. Everyone goes through crisis. The Needer may have a physical, emotional or mental problem so deep or unique, the group can't help them on their own. A small group is not set up for some serious issues. If the Needer can't hear the importance of balancing the group conversation, a group leader or member must take the Needer after the group and explain that they care about him and want him to get the help he needs. Groups can help find the Needer the therapist or other help he/she needs. If it is a temporary crisis, the Needer could get outside help while still attending the group. (If it requires therapy, and the member(s) can't pay, the group can offer to help pay.)
- **The Know-it-all.** See themselves as the expert whose role is to teach. Can shut a group down if others don't feel they have the knowledge to speak. Facilitator needs to intervene: Bill, I can see you know a lot. I want to make sure that we all know that no one is the expert when it comes to God. We are all learning. Shari, what do you think?" If it continues, take that person aside after the group or over coffee.

#### Common issues

- **Personal conflict between members.** Around politics, etc. You can be mutually supportive, but you may not be able to solve the disagreement. Talk to the folks involved outside the meeting, perhaps over coffee, together or separately –Be honest. You have to say what the problem is. Think about how to say it. “We love you and don't want to lose you or the group. What kind of help do you need to help work this out? Do you want us to help you find help?”
- **Other issues:** Coming late, never coming, etc.

## Family Small Groups with Children

UPC gives family groups the freedom to do what they, as a group, decide works best for them. There doesn't seem to be a one-size-fits-all way to meet together with children, so below are some ideas to consider for your group.

### Getting started

We encourage group members to work together at their first meeting on a small group agreement so everyone is on the same page. The agreement in the "Small Group Agreements" section, above, includes sections specifically for family groups that include children.

The goals of UPC family groups are for the adults to get some study and prayer time and some worship singing and a simple Bible lesson for the kids. Regardless of the childcare option a group chooses, many groups start the evening with some mixing and mingling and then singing together with both adults and kids.

### Younger Kids

Most of the groups we launch tend to have younger kids (6 and under) which means they need some adult supervision.

- Some groups have a singing and/or Bible story time with the kids at the beginning of the evening, and then the kids go to a separate room with a parent or babysitter.
- Some groups don't mind if the kids are running around the adults. This can have a more chaotic feel, but some people love that.

### Older kids

- Sometimes elementary-age kids are included in a modified version of the study but it depends upon the goals/expectations of the family group.
- Sometimes the kids are in the next room playing games and building their own sense of community, albeit separately.

### At the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting

The group members can decide whether or not they will continue, and many do. When groups decide to continue they sometimes change how often they meet and the goals or meeting format may change too as the group and the plans with the kids settle into place. Some groups go on to meet twice/month for study and then once/month for a family fun activity or meal.

**Dani Forbess, who works as the Faith Formation Lead with UPC's Children and Family Ministries** would love to talk with you about ideas for helping your children grow with God as a part of your family group time. Contact her at 206-524-7301 x227, [danif@upc.org](mailto:danif@upc.org).

# Small Group Life Cycle

By Renée Sundberg, Pastor of Community Life

All groups go through stages—working through the rough spots together and celebrating the joyful moments is necessary in reaching the later stages of group cohesion. The rewards are great—even transforming! A transformational small group is a nourishing body that helps us grow and mature in Christ. This scripture takes us through stages.

Below are descriptions of each stage and what facilitators can do to help their groups grow stronger.

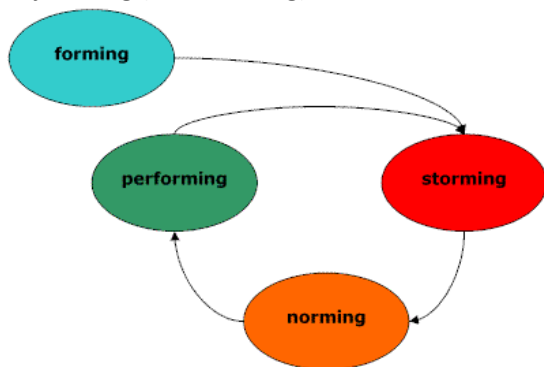
Scripture: Ephesians 4: 1-3; 7; 12-16

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace... each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift... to **equip the saints** for the work of ministry, for **building up the body of Christ**, until all of us **come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity**, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children...but **speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him** who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, **joined and knitted together** by every ligament with which it is equipped, as **each part is working properly**, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

## Developmental Sequence in Small Groups

Bruce W. Tuckman and Mary Ann Jensen (1965, 1977)

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing
- Adjourning (or Mourning)



**The GROUP COVENANT is a relevant and useful tool in every stage of the group!**

### ***FORMING (orientation/testing/dependence/bonding)***

Forming happens when groups first come together. Can be at the beginning of the group, or the beginning of a group season. Often, groups will also revisit this time when new group members join. The forming stage is marked by a time of orientation in which group members get to know one another.

**The group members** are guarded, reticent to share deep feelings or thoughts. Still trying to ‘feel each other out’ and understand the groups’ dynamics. They wonder if they belong, if the group will work out and what’s expected. There is anxiety, anticipation and some excitement. Conversation is around safe topics.

**A facilitator** should prepare well to ease anxiety and provide solid leadership to make the purpose of the group clear (thru covenant). Seek to make people feel welcome, connected and relaxed. Show that the ideas of each person are valued and welcome. Do activities that help members get acquainted. Personally set the example for sharing honestly, being mindful that too much intimacy at the beginning frightens people.

### ***STORMING (conflict)***

Occurs when groups have become comfortable enough to allow conflict. Instead of brushing issues under the rug safety, groups are willing to engage conflict to maintain group health. “There’s something wrong, we must not be doing this right.’ Individuals may disagree on the purpose and goals of the group. People may cling to those who share their view, resulting in cliques. It’s important to remember that conflict and frustration is a part of every group process (whether it’s a Small Group, team or committee). Not all groups will make it.

“Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” *James 1:2-3*

**The group members** wonder if they can trust this group and if it will survive. Enthusiasm might wane. Impatience may set in. Differences in personality, expectations and maturity can create conflict. Some may want to leave. The group can learn a lot about trust now—how honest they can be and if they can open up. They also evaluate whether the group will be a cooperative, collaborative community bringing mutual benefit and growth. People can begin to own the life of the group.

**A facilitator** can encourage the group by setting the tone for sharing—being respectfully honest and making it okay to disagree with kindness. Promote healthy tension: allow for frustration to be expressed and challenge the group to work through the issues. Revisiting, adjusting and relying on the covenant helps. If a member exits, normalize it as much as possible and deflect feelings of defensiveness. Help group members not take it personally.

### ***NORMING (group cohesion)***

If a group sticks it out through storming, they can begin norming. Norming is creating and agreeing to group expectations. Members know one another’s quirks and unique personalities and have developed ways to relate. When conflict arises, the group has an understanding of how to work through it together. Members express intimate, personal opinions. The group is living not only by formal written covenant, but informal norms (understandings, practices, culture, “the way things are usually done”).

**The group members** have a feeling of trust. They know how to be a group together and own the group. They’ve bonded through the storming stage and identify with each other. Cliques are gone. Conflict is managed by the group members. They have an agreed-upon plan or standard way for managing conflict. Feel comfortable with the group and as a result may resist change (taking new members, for example, or fearing group break-up).

**A facilitator** can help the group deepen in the Five Purposes of a Transformational Small Group. This is a good season to have an activity that allows you to relate as friends to celebrate the strength of the group. The group might be ready to develop more in each area—especially outreach to others since they have done the work of relationship and conflict with one another. Identifying and encouraging the use of gifts for the Kingdom are worthy goals to move the group towards the next stage.

### ***PERFORMING (functional roles)***

Performing groups have found their stride. They’ve identified the strengths of the people in the group, determined different roles that individuals play (roles become flexible and functional); and have made the most of their relationships

and skills to achieve great things. The small group has gathered together to worship the Lord, Study the Word, love and serve their neighbors, relate as friends, and care for each other. In the performing stage, these purposes can be tangibly seen in the group—they are a community that cares for each other and are experiencing significant growth in their Christian life. Some churches say this is when a group is ready to birth a new group by commissioning a leader (and perhaps some other members) from that group to help start a new group.

**The group members** share positive feelings; distribute leadership; give feedback; take risks; keep goals clear. They might feel they want to take action—they are ready to risk and give to others. They can solve a problem together. They feel acceptance, warmth, determination and freedom—they are energized; they love one another.

**A facilitator** can encourage the risks and challenges the group wants to take and keep goals clear. Continue to attend to the group process. Keep relationships deep and honest; resting on successes leads to boredom. Break the routine and liven things up with a retreat. Outreach activities are a good idea—whether together or supporting one another’s individual mission endeavors. (Mission can happen at every stage, but fullest expression perhaps at this stage!)

### ***ADJOURNING (Or “mourning” given the loss that is sometimes felt)***

At some point groups reach an end. Some are planned—groups may multiply by dividing and birthing a new group. Folks may move away or life circumstances may change. Some groups don’t gel. Some may not function the way they used to. All are legitimate reasons to end a group. Don’t consider this a failure! A number of wonderful things may have taken place in people’s lives through the group. Celebrate these!

Many groups run on minimal life support for a long time before they can claim a true end. A typical way is sometimes reducing the frequency of meetings. This only prolongs the life of a group when the group would best be served by moving on. Don’t be afraid to end and strive for the best ending you can!

**The group members** can feel warmth, appreciation and sadness or failure. They can be evaluating the worth of the group and their growth and learning in it. They welcome a chance to review, reflect and give thanks.

**The facilitator.** Ending a group can be stressful, particularly when dissolving is unplanned. The facilitator needs to help facilitate a good ending to help bring closure. Take time to celebrate what took place and affirm one another. Try not to do this all in one meeting, but allow some time for the transition over a couple of meetings. Express love and respect and show appreciation for individuals. Review and reflect on the group together. Have one session to do this and perhaps another to have a dinner. Commissioning folks on to their next steps might be appropriate.

### **OTHER NOTES ON STAGES**

- No generalization can describe all groups; some groups may not even go through these stages.
- Stages are also not clean-cut...some overlap.
- Some have proposed more cyclical models. Bales argues that group members tend to seek a balance between accomplishing the task and building interpersonal relationships in the group. The focus shifts between norming and performing.

### **The GROUP COVENANT is a relevant and useful tool in every stage of the group!**


- **Forming**-For comfort; safety; establishing a pattern.
- **Storming**-Conflict creates desire for structural clarification and commitment. Renegotiation of roles and rules are helpful.
- **Norming**-As the group is cohesive to set some future stretches in agreement.
- **Performing**-As group steps out in some challenge to keep the goals clear and balanced.
- **Adjourning**-In reviewing the impact of the group.

All groups go through stages—working through the rough spots together and celebrating the joyful moments is necessary in reaching the later stages of group cohesion. The rewards are great—even transforming!

# Bringing Service into the Life of Your Small Group

By Mike McCormick Huentelman, Director of Urban Outreach, UPC

“Love your neighbor” is not only part of the 5 Purposes of Life-Changing Small Groups, it is also part of the Great Commandment that Jesus gave to all believers (Matthew 22:36-40).

- **We are sent as Jesus was sent** (John 20:21) - Jesus came to bring salvation; but while he lived on this earth, he also reached out with compassion to individuals around him. He drew a small group around him, and members of that group grew in both their understanding and in their *experience* of God as they joined Jesus in that earthly ministry. Moreover, he then sent them – as he sends us – out into the world to bring the news of his salvation and the evidence of his love through acts of compassion.
- **Not good to be alone** (Genesis 2:18) – We are learning how important it is for us to be in Christian community. In addition, our mission ministry partners and our missionaries need the support and encouragement we can bring by coming alongside them in sharing their ministry and their lives as well.
- **Engaging in ministry outside the church is fun and exciting** (Luke 10:17) – There is nothing quite so compelling as seeing God at work in the world in ways that exceed our expectations. Prayerful engagement in outreach can put us in the middle of story that we can see unfold with our very eyes.
- **The Outreach Dept. is happy to resource you.**
  1. **Ideas for serving together with your group** are online at <http://www.upc.org/serve.aspx> . Look for opportunities with the  icon.
  2. **Contact Mike McCormick Huentelman**, 206-524-7301 x 214, mikem@upc.org.

Small groups are not meant to just serve their members. Groups that remain inwardly focused can grow stale. You have a greater calling. Loving people beyond your group puts your faith into action and gives the group a chance to work for Christ as a team. As you are fed by the Word and prayers and support from each other, take that strength and share it beyond your group.

**Your group can come up with it's own ideas!** Pray for God to show you where he wants you to help and share his love. Tidy the yard for a neighbor who is not able, have each person call someone they haven't spoken to in a while, bring a meal to a friend who is sick, donate needed items for low-income families, pray for your group members who are already serving.

# Celebrate!

## Why celebrate?

- Don't we all long to be a part of something fun, exciting, and life-giving?
- Celebration is an important way to love God and others.
- God is good, and it's powerful to remember how.
- The Bible tells us so.
  - John 15:10
  - Philippians 4:4

## Ideas for celebrating the Lord

- Share stories of how God has worked in your life this week, answered prayers
- Take turns choosing a Psalm to read
- Share prayers of thanksgiving and praise
- Sing worship songs

## Ideas for celebrating each person

- By listening, affirming, caring and seeking to understand without judgment or unasked advice.
- By ministering to each other – babysitting, hospital visits, bringing meals to members in difficult times, networking to solve a problem, cards, etc.
- By rejoicing together – birthdays, anniversaries, promotions, weddings, babies, graduations, positive steps toward spiritual growth and triumphs over difficulty
- By calling out each other's individual gifts and encouraging their use, within the group and in ministry beyond

## Ideas for celebrating your small group

- Attend church together
- Quarterly or monthly social events with your small group: dinner, picnic, trip to the beach, in-home movie night, group photo
- Annual weekend retreat

## Your Small Group Celebration

- After your first six weeks together, and periodically afterward, enjoy a dinner and conversation– the gift of sharing a meal.
- Take a moment to share what you have enjoyed about this group, or how you have grown in this time together.
- For new groups, talk about whether the group will continue.
  - If so, who will host and facilitate the next meeting. Same schedule?
  - If not, pray for each other and commission each other toward your next steps in faith.