



HOW TO LEAD A

Healthy Small Group

A Practical and
Easy-to-Use Guide

Kevin Mills

THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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Introduction

“WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE BOOK OF THE BIBLE?”

I’ve been asked this question numerous times—and not just because I’m a pastor. The question has been posed in various group settings as an icebreaker or discussion starter. It’s always interesting to hear how people answer and the reasons they give for why a particular book of the Bible ranks at the top of their list.

I don’t know that I’ve ever heard anyone ask, “What’s your *least* favorite book of the Bible?” Not many Christ followers would want to answer that one. Any response sounds like a criticism of God’s Word. It’s like asking, “What’s your least favorite thing about your spouse?”

“I’ll plead the Fifth, thank you.”

But I’m going to go out on a limb here and answer the question about my least favorite book of the Bible.

Ecclesiastes.

Without a doubt.

I’m convinced that Solomon was clinically depressed when he wrote Ecclesiastes. Though he had wealth, power, and access to every pleasure and creature comfort of life, he was absolutely miserable. Everything was pointless to him. His life had no purpose. He found himself swimming in a deep sea of meaninglessness.

If you're depressed, don't read Ecclesiastes. I can sum it up for you: Solomon examines virtually every aspect of life and concludes that nothing really matters. Whether it's work, money, pleasure, or achievements, at the end of the day, they're all just pointless pursuits. According to Solomon, there isn't anything in our short lives that's actually worth our time and energy.

Well, except for one: *relationships*.

In one of the few bright spots in the book, Solomon recognizes the great value of friendships:

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor. . . .
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

ECCLESIASTES 4:9, 12

In this passage, Solomon reminds us that we are designed to live in community with others. Relationships are not optional. According to the wisest man (other than Jesus) who ever lived, friendships are the one commodity truly worth pursuing.

When we step back from Ecclesiastes and look at the Bible as a whole, we find an oft-repeated theme: *Love God and love others*. In other words, the two things that matter most in life are a relationship with God and relationships with other people. Everything else falls way down the list.

Healthy churches emphasize both of these pursuits, and they do it most effectively through small groups. Arguably, this is the most important ministry in your church. Organizing, promoting, and supporting small groups create the necessary environment for teaching people how to love God and love one another. Any church

with a healthy small group structure and committed small group leaders will be a healthy, growing church. Conversely, any church without healthy small groups is undoubtedly an unhealthy church.

This is where *you* come in. Someone has observed God's hand on your life. They've noticed your heart for the Lord and your love for others. They've recognized your gifts in teaching and leading others. And now they've asked you to consider leading a small group in your church. Perhaps they're hoping you and your spouse will together lead a couples group. Or you've been asked to lead a group of singles, men, or women.

After praying about the matter, you said *yes*. You want to make a difference for God's Kingdom. Your greatest joy is seeing God change people's lives. You're willing to do whatever it takes to assist in the ministry of your church.

However, despite everything, you feel ill-equipped to lead a group. Like many Christians, your desire to minister exceeds your knowledge of how to do so. Yet you want to be better prepared to do the work God has for you.

My hope is that this book will add several useful items to your ministry tool belt—combining scriptural guidelines with practical ideas for leading your small group more effectively. By God's grace, and through your attention to what his Word teaches, you can shepherd your group well. Healthy, focused groups will change lives and change your church.

If you feel you're not qualified, you're exactly right. Apart from God himself, nobody's up to the task. However, when you realize you're not enough, you'll find that God is more than enough. He will surely reward your faithfulness.

—*Kevin Mills*

A Holy Calling

Your Role as a Small Group Leader

WHEN I FIRST MET Zach and Ashley, they were recent college graduates. Both had grown up going to church most Sundays. Zach's family lived in a rural community and attended a small country church. Ashley's family lived in a suburb and were members of a traditional, mainline-denomination church. But by the time they met, during their sophomore year in college, neither one was going to church other than for the obligatory Easter and Christmas services with their families. Though both would say they were Christians, their faith made only a minimal difference in their lives.

They dated throughout college, married after graduation, and accepted jobs in our suburban community. After purchasing their first home, they began to settle into their new life together.

My small group leader at the time lived across the street from

Zach and Ashley. One evening, he and his wife, with a pound cake in hand, walked over to greet their new neighbors. Zach and Ashley knew virtually no one in our community and were excited to meet another couple. They stood in the front doorway and talked for more than an hour. As they parted ways, my small group leader said to Zach and Ashley, “You know, there’s a group that meets at our house on Thursday nights for a Bible study. We’d love to have you join us. Just come on over at seven o’clock if you’re interested.”

The previous year had been such a whirlwind of activity—getting engaged, planning for and having the wedding, moving to a new community, and starting new jobs—that Zach and Ashley hadn’t discussed church or much of anything else about their spiritual lives. However, they were looking for friendships, and this was their first opportunity to meet some new people.

The next Thursday, they nervously walked across the street. I first met them standing in the kitchen of my small group leader’s home. They didn’t ask, and I didn’t volunteer that I was a pastor. At no point did anyone in our small group announce that we all attended the same church. We read from the Bible, we discussed the passage, and we prayed for one another. Zach and Ashley left at the end of the night, and I privately wondered if they’d return.

But they were back the following week. And the week after that.

On their fourth consecutive week attending the Bible study, Zach suddenly interrupted the group and said, “Hey, I’ve got a question. Do all of you go to the same church?”

We all nodded, not realizing that Zach and Ashley hadn’t known that.

Zach looked at Ashley, grabbed her hand, and turned back to the group.

“Ashley and I want you guys to know what a difference this Bible study has made in our lives. Since we’ve been coming here on Thursday nights, we’re having discussions we’ve never had before. We’re reconnecting with God and talking about how we want our marriage to look and how we want to raise our family. This has had a huge impact us. If you all go to the same church, we want to come on Sunday. Just tell us what time it starts and how to get there.”

Zach and Ashley have since moved on to a community in another part of our state. Recently, when they came through town on their way to a vacation destination, my wife and I had dinner with them. They talked about their jobs and their new home, but mostly they talked about their church. They’ve plugged into a small group. They are serving in the congregation. They are faithful in their giving and in their attendance.

They now have a four-year-old son. When they put him to bed at night, they read to him from a children’s Bible. He attends Sunday school and participates in Vacation Bible School and other activities offered by the church. Zach and Ashley are doing everything they can to raise their son in a way that will incline his heart toward the Lord.

Zach’s and Ashley’s lives were changed through the ministry of a local church small group, and that impact is now being felt in the next generation as well. There will likely come a day when their son falls in love, gets married, and has a family of his own. My prayer is that he will instruct his children in the same principles he’s now being taught.

And it all started when a small group leader invited them to a Bible study.

Your role as a small group leader is a holy calling. The Lord

will use it to change lives, marriages, and families—potentially for generations to come.

According to Thom Rainer, who for nearly forty years has been committed to the growth and health of the local church and its leaders, individuals are five times more likely to assimilate into the life of a church if they are involved in a group, instead of attending worship only.¹ A healthy, positive group experience is the key to connecting people with a church and helping them continue to grow in their faith.

In the last chapter of Matthew, we read the following instructions from Jesus to his followers:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:19-20

These are the church's marching orders: *Go and make disciples*. This is our mission.

Notice that Jesus didn't say, "Go and make converts." Neither did he say, "Go and make church members," nor, "Go and make good, upstanding citizens." He said, "Go and make *disciples*."

In other words, go and make people whose lives are continually shaped by the gospel; who follow Christ daily—not perfectly, but faithfully; whose lives will change the culture around them; who will leave a legacy of faith to their families, friends, communities, and generations to come.

¹ Thom S. Rainer, "What Does Your Church's Group Name Communicate?," *Church Answers* (blog), October 7, 2015, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/what-does-your-churchs-group-name-communicate/>.

I don't think I can overstate the importance and the significance of your calling as a small group leader. Eternity is on the line. The future of the church is at stake. The spiritual war in your community will be won or lost on the front lines of small group ministry. Your role as a leader is holy, invaluable, and essential in your local church and the church at large.

When I arrived at my current ministry in 2007, we had only a handful of small groups in our church. The congregation had endured a troubled season, and the difficulties had seeped into the small group meetings. Soon, discussions centered far more on events happening in the church than on the evening's biblical text or study. Over the course of the previous year, half the members and regular attenders had left the church, and most of the small groups simply dissolved. By the time I arrived, only a few groups still met, and even those had dwindled in their attendance. Instead of "small groups," we could have called them "tiny groups."

It was tough.

There were no stories of life change. There were no baptisms. The ministry of the church was frozen. I realized quickly that our church was like an ocean diver whose oxygen line had been severed. If we didn't repair this lifeline soon, we simply weren't going to make it.

I hired a small groups pastor, and we rolled up our sleeves and went to work. We looked at our numbers and assessed the situation. We reviewed the names of past leaders and small group members. For a while, we faced the challenge of ascertaining who was in and who was out. We made countless phone calls. We had untold lunch and coffee meetings. Those initial months took a lot of boots-on-the-ground work.

I met personally with every leader who remained at the church. I talked about the importance of small groups to the purpose and

mission of the church. I shared honestly about our lack of leaders and the need to revitalize our small group ministry. I asked if they were willing to join me in leading a small group.

Several told me they couldn't. They either were not in a healthy place spiritually, or they held lingering bitterness in their hearts. They knew they wouldn't be able to lead a small group effectively.

Others took the opportunity to let me know they had decided to leave the church. Those were hard conversations.

However, a number agreed to serve and help us reignite our small group ministry. They worked with us to recruit members. We equipped them with resources and did our best to train and retrain leaders. After some time, the heart of our small group ministry began beating again. People met and prayed, studied the Bible, encouraged one another, cared for one another, and held one another accountable. They grew in their faith.

You can probably guess what happened next. We began to grow as a church—both spiritually and numerically. With a healthy (or at least *healthier*) small group ministry, the other components of the church began to operate more effectively. Worship was more powerful. Giving increased. More people came to outreach events. It was easier to recruit volunteers.

Why did all this happen? Because we were once again *making disciples*.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I'm going to say it again: Your role as a small group leader is critical in the church. It is a holy calling. Your pastor and other leaders greatly appreciate your willingness to step up. Your ministry is vital to the health of your local church and to the spread of the gospel around the world.

Thank you for serving in this way.