

THE *Discover Together*
BIBLE STUDY SERIES

by Sue Edwards

Training Guide

for Small-Group Leaders



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Studying God's Word together is an exciting adventure, requiring a leader. Thank you for your willingness to lead the group. Your role as leader is to guide a discussion characterized by

- a nonthreatening climate conducive to an honest exchange of ideas;
- a flow of stimulating and meaningful interaction;
- the presentation of God-honoring, biblically based insight.

What can you do to help the group succeed?

1. PUT THE WOMEN AT EASE.

Express care for the women from the moment the first woman walks in the door until the last woman leaves. Greet them as they arrive. Initiate conversation before the discussion begins. Draw out women by asking nonthreatening questions such as "How long have you lived here?" or "Tell me a little about yourself." Especially focus on the woman who seems shy or lonely. Provide name tags to help women learn each other's names. Set an atmosphere of unconditional love and inclusion where women can relax, learn, and share.

- *Be other-centered!* This is not the time to visit with your best friend. You are your group's shepherdess! Many women are in dreary circumstances and have varied spiritual needs. Make walking into your group a highlight of their week!
- *Develop good listening skills.* By intentional, focused listening, you convey that the participation of each group member is valued.

You may be the only reflection of Christ some women ever see!

2. BEGIN AND END ON TIME.

Get started on time even if only two or three are there. Late arrivals will soon learn they must be prompt. There will always be stragglers. Begin without them. Quickly and graciously greet them when they arrive. And honor women's busy lives by ending when you said you would, but allow women who want more fellowship to remain behind and enjoy visiting.

3. BEGIN WITH ENTHUSIASM.

Ask someone who is enthusiastic to answer the first question. Get off to an exciting start! Keep your eyes off your study guide as much as possible. Look at the women as they are speaking. Train yourself



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not to just read aloud lesson notes or the introductory paragraph, but instead rephrase it and speak it out in your own words.

4. ASSUME AUTHORITY (BUT REMAIN GRACIOUS).

- Be firm but not bossy.
- Be gentle but stay in control.

Someone has to be in charge, and you are it! The women expect you to lead. If you are naturally soft-spoken, make a deliberate effort to project your voice. Sit up and direct the group. You are there to keep the group on target and make sure time is not wasted. This is a serious role but don't forget to maintain your sense of humor and have fun.

5. ENCOURAGE *DISCUSSION*.

The discussion group leader is *not* a lecturer. *After* the discussion, you may want to wrap up the study with a formal lecture, but during the discussion the leader does not teach. She does not spotlight herself as the one with the answers but instead focuses on the women in the group. Her role is

- to direct the flow of the discussion;
- to encourage interaction;
- to set the climate or tone;
- to guard against poor use of time;
- to lead the group in an understanding of the material.

Establish an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance where each member is free to share what she's thinking and feeling. We may not always agree with a woman's view, but we can respect her by listening thoughtfully to her ideas.

As a leader you do not correct or "straighten out" women in the group. Avoid saying "No," or "But . . ." Some possible responses when you hear an unusual answer are

- "I've never thought of it in that way."
- "That's an interesting perspective."
- "I see what you're saying."

We want an atmosphere where each woman shares what the Holy Spirit is teaching her through God's Word. Women need to feel they can ask their questions and not be made to feel foolish.

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It is imperative, though, that a biblical perspective be presented. Draw out women who have solid biblical insight to present their views when the group needs to hear a biblical answer. In this way, women hear the biblical perspective, but no one in the group is singled out as the one with the wrong answer. As women continue studying the Bible, they soon discover God's perspectives for themselves.

6. CONSIDER CALLING ON WOMEN BY NAME.

This is better than asking for a volunteer to answer a question because

- usually the same few women volunteer;
- waiting for volunteers consumes time, causing the discussion to drag.

This is also your greatest tool for maintaining control! You can bring out shy women while keeping talkers from dominating. Call on the quiet women early in the discussion because often when they have participated and been affirmed, they find it easier to speak up. If you prefer not to call on women by name, do your best to give everyone an opportunity to participate.

Move quickly through questions with obvious answers. For example, observation questions can be answered easily right from the text. Call on one person and then move on, or quickly answer the question yourself as a transition to other kinds of questions.

Spend most of the discussion time on sharing and opinion questions. Sharing and opinion questions bring out interesting discussion. Your ultimate goal is to encourage natural interaction. As the women become more comfortable, you'll see a more natural interchange, with women speaking up in response to one another. This makes the group less like a question-and-answer schoolroom session. That's good!

This type of discussion, however, takes more skill to control. If the group becomes chaotic and the quieter ones are not participating, step back in and take control. Otherwise, let this more natural interaction continue—but learn to sum up ideas expressed and move on to the next question when appropriate. You are responsible for the flow of discussion.

7. USE VOLUNTEERS FOR SHARE QUESTIONS.

Let the women know that personal application questions are for *volunteers only!* It's inappropriate to ask a woman to reveal personal information unless she's ready. Our goal, however, is to share our heartaches and struggles. How can you facilitate a deep level of personal sharing? *Be ready to share on personal application questions occasionally.* Be real with the group! A great benefit of discussion groups is that we build community

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when participants open up about their fears or feelings of inadequacy. Guard against spending too much time, though, working through personal problems. Life's answers are found in Scripture.

8. BE SURE EVERY COMMENT IS AFFIRMED!

The leader must be sure every comment is acknowledged in a positive way. Nothing feels more awkward than to express an idea and have it ignored. This conveys rejection. If no one else in the group interacts or responds to the comment, then the leader must affirm the group member with warm words like, "Thank you for your insight," or at least, "That's an interesting way of looking at it." Try to respond as you would in everyday conversation, as naturally as possible. *Affirming the women is a necessity!*

Quick affirmations besides "good point":

Excellent	Fantastic
Super	Great answer
Wonderful	Terrific
Wow	Fabulous
Absolutely	I agree
What insight	That was deep
I like that	Wish I'd thought of that

Some affirmations for the group are

- "I'm so happy to see all of you!"
- "There are many places you could be today, and I'm so glad you chose to be here!"
- "Thank you for being so well prepared!"
- "I appreciate each one of you and the effort you made to be here."

9. KEEP UP THE PACE.

The pace of the discussion is determined by the personalities of the group members and the skill and preparation of the leader. Observe the pace of your group. Is it peppy or does it drag? Develop strategies to keep the group moving and interesting. There are two extremes, and each requires a different response.

A. The quiet group.

Does your group hesitate to answer? Do you feel like you are "pulling teeth" to get them to participate? Then you have a quiet group. They often water-ski over issues and are content with pat answers. Their pace is too slow—it drags—and they

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tend to finish quickly. But when the discussion is over, it wasn't very interesting. What can you do to perk up a quiet group and shoot it full of energy?

- Muster enthusiasm.
- Encourage, encourage, encourage.
- Be patient; intimacy takes time.
- Ask energetic women to interject stimulating questions to spark interest.
- Draw out answers by calling on many women for each question.
- Don't settle for a pat answer.

B. The talkative group.

This group has difficulty finishing the questions because so many women want to participate. The pace is perky and fun, but the discussion is easily sidetracked. When you go down rabbit trails, you talk about issues unrelated to the Bible study. This is frustrating for women who want to understand and apply the passage. When you seldom finish the lesson, the more serious students become discouraged.

The group is filled with women who love to talk and have interesting ideas to contribute. The problem comes when the more verbal women dominate those who are less articulate and when the group can't get through the lesson. What can you do?

- Assume a greater air of authority.
- Privately elicit the more talkative women's help in drawing out quieter women.
- Cut off talkers (as graciously as possible).

To refocus a group, here are some things you could say:

- "In the interest of our time remaining, let's move on."
- "Let's pick up the pace a little."
- "Let's finish that discussion after Bible study."
- "Let's finish our questions, and then we'll come back to this."

Whenever the group is sidetracked, the leader must decide how much time she will spend there. Pursue a rabbit trail *briefly* if it is of common interest and time allows. Then get back to the meat of the lesson. Do your utmost to finish every week. The women expect it!

What should you do if a woman breaks down in tears? This *special circumstance* can stall the pace and tempt the group to get sidetracked for the rest of the lesson. *DON'T!*

Be sensitive but also think of the group as a whole. The group often wants to spend the remaining time consoling, counseling, and fixing the problem. You can't! Allow a couple minutes of tender feedback, but then step in and *pray briefly* for the

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woman. Assure her you will talk with her later. Then move on. Later, talk with her privately and give her your encouragement and support. But *do not discontinue working through the lesson*.

10. CONTROL YOUR OWN TALKING.

The leader is in ministry to others. This is the participants' time! If the group is talkative, the leader should limit her talking. If the group tends to be quiet, talk to prime the pump and then back off when the women are participating.

11. MAINTAIN UNITY OF SPIRIT.

Never speak in a critical manner about any church or denomination, and do your best to discourage this kind of talking in the group. Redirect the conversation. This kind of criticism is divisive, destroying the unity we're striving to build. A woman in the group may be offended if another group member slanders a group she grew up in or respects. Avoid politics.

12. STAY IN TOUCH WITH YOUR GROUP.

Keep in touch regularly with your group—by voice, text, or email. If you never contact them, you are sending them a message that you don't care! Let them know that you are praying for them—especially if they are absent. This builds relationships. If a new member joins the group, be sure to call the first week to answer any questions and familiarize her with group procedures. You are a shepherdess—so tenderly nurture your flock.

If you encounter particular challenges in your group, you may email me at sedwards@newdoors.info.

WILL YOUR GROUP PRAY TOGETHER?

You need to decide if part of your group time will be spent praying for the specific needs of women in your group. If so, here are suggested methods:

- Let the women know that there will be prayer time and ask them to submit a *personal* request.
- Encourage the women to write out their requests as they do their lesson rather than waiting to do so after they arrive.
- Ask your group to write down their prayer requests on 3 x 5 index cards.

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- Collect the cards and *you* (the leader) read the requests aloud to the group. Share any answered prayer at this time.
- Either pass the cards back out to the group or place them in the middle.
- Ask the group members each to pick a card and pray for the request during the group prayer time or during the week.
- As the leader is reading the requests, the women can write them down, or one person can keep a group prayer journal.
- A volunteer can e-mail the requests to group members.