

A LEADER'S MANUAL

FOR THOSE LEADING HOME GROUPS AND BIBLE STUDIES

by Dr Nick Hawkes

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to overemphasise the importance of small groups in the life of the church. They have always existed in Christendom and have been the structures which have allowed the very essence of Christianity to be nurtured since the first century. As Elton Trueblood says:

It is hard for us to visualise what early Christianity was like. Certainly it was very different from the Christianity known to us today.

There were no fine buildings. There was no hierarchy; there were no theological colleges; there were no Sunday schools; there were no choirs. ONLY SMALL GROUPS OF BELIEVERS ... SMALL FELLOWSHIPS.

In the beginning there wasn't even a New Testament. The New Testament itself was not so much a cause of these fellowships as a result of them. Thus the first books of the New Testament were the letters written to the little fellowships partly because of their difficulties, dangers and temptations.

All they had was the fellowship; nothing else; no standing; no prestige; no honour ... The early Christians were not people of standing, but they had a secret power among them and the secret power resulted from the way in which they were members of another.

Elton Trueblood, *The Yoke of Christ* (James Clarke & Co., 1961), p.25

SOME STORIES ABOUT HOME GROUPS

I was once the leader of the Senior Youth Group at Brooklyn Park Uniting Church in Adelaide. My wife and I had restarted this youth group but after a couple of years, numbers had plateaued at about forty members. We were gaining as many new members as were leaving – and too many were leaving because we could not give them the individual attention they needed.

After we spent the large part of one night in prayer with a friend, we felt it right to break up the youth group into three home groups. Whilst we felt that this direction was given by God, I confess that I was very nervous indeed at breaking up what seemed to be a perfectly healthy youth group.

Our three new youth home groups met every week on a day that was suitable to them and all came together on the last Saturday night of the month for a combined celebration.

In those days, there was little material available for youth to use in home fellowships. As such, the leaders of each group and their apprentice leaders used to meet with me every two months to pray, train and try to discern what God wanted us to do and teach in our home groups. Once the teaching subject had been chosen, it was usually my responsibility as co-ordinator to research the background material for the home group leaders.

Within two years, we were discipling over one hundred young people in over ten home groups. The door was open for unlimited growth.

Another story comes from later in my ministry. I was now ordained and had to face the challenge of following a dear friend into a parish settlement. My friend (who was single) had many gifts, but his

particular gift was his ability to visit a huge number of people each day. He was phenomenal. It didn't take long for me to work out that I could not do the same without losing my mind, my marriage and my ministry. I therefore trained a number of home group leaders, hoping to start at least three home groups that would share the pastoral care workload. We began eight home groups. Two and half years later, we had thirteen home groups and a new home group co-ordinator. Simply by making this a priority early in my ministry, I pastorally cared for over 150 people every fortnight.

WHAT ARE HOME GROUPS?

A home group is a group of people who meet regularly in the informal, non-threatening environment of someone's home for the purpose of worship, prayer, teaching and ministry under the direction of a leader and an apprentice leader.

Where home groups might differ from other forms of small groups run by churches is that the home groups talked about here are committed to growth. Once numbers in a home group have grown to about 16 the group multiplies into two, just like living cells in biology. This is why they are sometimes called cell groups. The apprentice leader takes the leadership of the new group and new apprentice leaders are then appointed to each home group.

When a home group multiplies, the apprentice leader taking charge of the new group should normally take with him or her at least half of the more mature Christians in the old group. (It is better to speak in terms of groups "multiplying by the grace of God" rather than splitting or dividing. It is more positive.)

Home groups are designed for:

- 1) Caring and sharing – They promote friendship. Home groups are places where people can get to know each other well, encourage each other and minister to each other's needs.
- 2) Teaching and discussion – It is through the home groups that the church's major teaching program is run.
- 3) Worship – Praise and worship of God in singing and in prayer is a central part of home groups.
- 4) Ministry and intercession – Praying powerfully for each other, the church and community.

Home groups are about friendships. In today's world where people don't feel they belong to a local community, where extended families don't exist any more and where families themselves are falling apart, home groups present an opportunity to belong and to be loved.

The loving friendship of a home group is the "cradle" in which faith can be born and nurtured.

Research conducted by Fuller Seminary in America has come up with the following figures:

Ways in which people are presented with the Gospel and its influence on the numbers who become active church members

	Academic Persuasion	Salesmanship-Type Persuasion	Influence of Friends
Active church members	35	36	169
Dropped out of church	25	209	6
Not converted	180	58	2

This helps explain why friendship is such an important aspect of home groups.

COMMITMENT TO GROWTH AND MISSION

Home groups are committed to growth. At some stage towards the end of each semester, the leader should ask the group who they can think of that they might ask to attend. The names of these people can be written down and prayed for each week. Two or three people are also asked to invite this person to share hospitality with them during the next term. This means that when they are invited to attend home group, they will have already developed a good friendship with two or three members. If you invite new people to tea and then take them on to their first home group, they will feel well supported and cared for.

Make it a cast iron policy to have a guest evening (perhaps with a barbecue) every six months to which prospective new members are invited.

It is important that the group adopt a missional attitude. This prevents the group existing purely for its own benefit. Everyone has the continual mission of inviting Christian and non-Christian friends along to their group. Some groups also adopt an outside project, e.g. looking after one or two lonely people in institutionalised care or doing the garden for elderly people.

COMPOSITION OF HOME GROUPS

Although it might seem ideal to have representatives of every age and levels of intellect in each home group, this does not always work in practice. Youth may feel inhibited by the presence of their parents, so specialist youth home groups are generally more suitable for them.

It is important that home groups are “affinity-based”. Groups work best when they contain people who have a natural affinity for each other. For this reason it is often best for home group leaders to invite those whom they relate to well to attend their group.

This can also allow for specialisation. Groups can be formed which are particularly orientated towards undergraduates or families with young children.

However, the danger that comes from having groups of like-minded people is that its members may never grow from having to face new social and theological challenges. It may also lead to the situation where no group is prepared to take on people with social problems. Groups must therefore not be too insular and comfortable but also do their part in seeking to break down the barriers that exist between people.

It will be important that no one home group has more than its fair share of “special care-requiring people”, otherwise it will earn the stigma of being the problem group.

Whilst groups of people with a natural affinity for each other are generally encouraged, there should be no barriers of acceptance or love between anyone. Certainly, members of all home groups should come together in unity to worship together at Sunday services.

When all else is equal, members of a home group should normally be drawn from the same geographical area. This not only reduces travelling time but promotes the incidence of casual contact between people during the week.

WHEN TO MEET

Home groups normally meet once a week or once a fortnight. It will be hard to build relationships or develop patterns of discipleship if you meet less often.

Our world is becoming increasingly busy. Because of this, many people find that fortnightly meetings work better. Some groups meet each week for the first three weeks of a month (perhaps using the fourth week for a purely social event).

It is a good idea to have different home groups meeting on different days and at different times in the week so that busy people can find a group that meets at a time when they are available.

Once an evening has been chosen, every effort should be made not to change it.

Provision should be made for the leaders to have a holiday from home group occasionally so that they remain fresh and motivated. Groups meeting weekly should usually have a break in the school holidays. Use the holidays to rest and perhaps meet together socially to have fun. If you meet fortnightly all year, try to mark the passing of each term with a social meeting. This not only provides a good opportunity to invite new members but also allows a starting point for new programs to begin.

Many churches have no home groups or meetings during one month of the year to allow for family holidays. If this is done, it may be wise to make some provision for social fellowship during the break to cater for those who want it.

Whenever a group closes for a period, it is important that they celebrate having been together by sharing a meal (or Holy Communion – if your denomination allows) at their last meeting.

There will be a greater sense of ownership of the group if its members are allowed to decide for themselves when and how often they will meet.

FINANCING THE GROUP

In order to cover the cost of the leader’s study book and the tea and coffee, it will be necessary for the leader to collect a few dollars from each member each term.

AUTHORITY AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE PASTOR

Home groups are an integral part of the local church's program. It is not an optional appended activity or an activity that is set up in competition to the church. It is the church's provision for its people that would not ordinarily be provided in the larger Sunday church services. As such, all of the church home groups are under the direction and authority of the Pastor and Church Leaders.

This means that home groups will not function properly in the church without the vision and direction of the Pastor. Tacit approval alone but non-involvement by the Pastor is not enough to ensure that the objectives of the home group are met. Even though the Pastor may delegate much of the responsibility for the running and coordination of the home groups, he or she must at all times know what is being taught and what is going on.

Because home groups are where the church's interactive, in-depth teaching takes place, no teaching material should be used that hasn't first had the approval of the Small Groups Coordinator or Pastor.

QUALIFICATIONS OF A LEADER

Each home group has a leader and an apprentice leader. Wherever possible, new leaders should be developed from within the parent home group. It is usually the responsibility of the leader to recruit an apprentice. However, it may be wise to check your thinking on who should be asked to be an apprentice with the small group coordinator. Investing in an apprentice is one of the most vital ministries you will ever do in the church.

The home group leader should be, above all else, a leader. He or she should also ideally be:

- 1) a shepherd
- 2) a facilitator (sees that things get done)
- 3) a visionary (always has plans for the future development of the group)
- 4) a teacher
- 5) an example.

In summary, leaders are those who:

- have a mature, consistent and vibrant faith
- spend time usually each day developing his or her own relationship with God
- are spiritually aware of what the Holy Spirit might be leading the group into
- are able to:
 - lead people to faith in Christ
 - encourage people to renew their faith continually and be empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry
 - pray for the sick
- are wise
- are a natural leader, i.e. are the person the rest of the group will automatically defer to as leader
- have good character
- are able to love.

DELEGATION

The leader should be a facilitator. This means that he/she should make it possible for things to be organised and to happen. The leader should not necessarily do everything. In fact, no one else will develop their gifts or leadership skills unless jobs are delegated. Certainly, the apprentice leader will develop no leadership skills unless he/she is able to take some responsibility in most meetings.

It is probably not a good idea for the leader to have to be responsible for picking people up in the car or for organising the music books just before the meeting. By asking others to do this, it spreads the workload and allows the leader to focus on other things.

Follow-up of people who were absent from a meeting is another job that should be delegated to a number of people in the group each week. The leader can still elect to visit people when he/she judges it necessary or appropriate, but he/she shouldn't feel that they have to do all the visiting or phone-calling.

It is possible that if leadership is causing you to be exhausted rather than excited, you may not be delegating enough.

Leaders should remember that it is also perfectly in order to invite guest speakers or musicians to home group occasionally to enrich the group's activity.

STAY IN CONTROL

As a leader you are responsible for the people in your group. As such, don't hesitate to step in and gently restore order in a situation that has gone astray (even if it is during a session that has been delegated to someone else). This doesn't mean you jump in on people all the time, but it does mean you remain in control.

FOLLOW-UP

Following up people who are new to the group or those who have been absent or are experiencing problems is important. It shows you care. It also promotes sharing and trust. Many an incipient problem has been sorted out by a timely visit. Above all else, this sort of care shows the love of God.

At the end of each meeting the leader determines who is missing and delegates someone to follow them up.

SHARED ACTIVITIES AND THE MINISTRY OF FOOD

Barbecues, shared meals and camps away greatly help the group to become a cohesive unit. It is important to develop the fun and friendship aspect of home groups – not least because of the very obvious truth that people like attending things that are fun.

There are few better ways to break down barriers and grow friendships than to share a meal together. For this reason, many home groups choose to begin with a shared meal. If this cannot be done, members of the home group are encouraged to invite people (particularly new people) to tea and afterwards go to home group. Sharing a meal together is also a good way for a group to end a series of studies.

Chatting over tea and coffee at home group also helps people to relax and relate.

THE HOME GROUP LEADERS' MEETING

Once every two months, all leaders and apprentice leaders meet together with the Small Group Coordinator and/or Pastor for training and encouragement. These meetings resemble a home group meeting in that they include worship and ministry.

The other functions they fulfil are:

- They set an example. The Coordinator or Pastor should display those leadership skills in the leaders' meeting that they want the leaders to use in home groups.
- To provide an opportunity for feedback from each group. Care should be taken that this does not take up too much time. Ministry to individual leaders can also take place during this time.
- They provide an opportunity for spiritual training where leaders can step out in faith and exercise their spiritual gifts in a non threatening atmosphere, i.e. they provide an opportunity for leaders to stretch themselves spiritually and to further develop their spiritual sensitivity.
- To provide an opportunity for the leaders to pray together and seek God's will for the future direction of their home groups. It is a time for planning for the future.
- Listening skills and teaching techniques can also be taught.
- A list of resources required by home group leaders can be drawn up, e.g. study books, report sheets and Bibles for new people.

MUSIC

Music is a great tool in encouraging people to worship. Any group which has a musician with guitar or keyboard is fortunate. However, there is no reason why a group without a musician can't sing, as there are many music DVDs available that can be sung to. Alternatively, worship music can simply be listened to in order to quieten the soul and encourage a profound sense of intimacy, love and engagement with God.

Music is not essential, however. It is simply a good tool for worship. It is worship, not music, that is essential.

It is perhaps wise to sound a cautionary note about copyright. Music can't be copied and used in home groups without a copyright arrangement. Keep on the right side of the law!

PREPARATION

Preparation for each home group is vital.

- The aims for each lesson should be clearly defined.
- The music and musicians for worship should be organised.
- Plan what you propose to teach and how you will do it.
- Pray, pray, pray.

It's important that leaders set a good example for their apprentice leaders in preparing well. Some leaders get together with their apprentice leaders over breakfast once a week to do this (people's family time in the evenings is precious and should not be taken up if this can be avoided). Note: a well prepared meeting does not mean an inflexible meeting.

THE PROGRAM FOR A TYPICAL HOME GROUP MEETING

There is no “right” program for a home group. However, a normal home group should have a time for worship, sharing, teaching, prayer and ministry. A typical program is set out below:

- 7:30 Worship in song and prayer.
- 7:45 A warm-up or ice-breaker activity to help people to relax and trust each other. This can be as informal as sharing a cup of coffee.
- 8:00 A time when each can share what God has been doing in their lives since they last met. It is a time to share joys, successes, sorrows and failures (some ministry or prayers of thanks may need to follow immediately).
- 8:15 Interactive teaching (with a conclusion that people can apply to their lives)
- 9:00 Ministry and intercession
- 9:15 Tea or coffee.

HOME GROUPS FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Couples with young children often need to get out and enjoy fellowship but are constrained by children. There is no reason why specialist home groups for such families should not be formed. Because of the extra work required for these groups, some may feel that they would be more manageable if they met once a fortnight rather than every week.

A typical format for a family home group might be:

- 6:00 Shared tea.
- 6:45 Communal singing and worship (with the children).
- 7:00 Children go to a separate room for teaching and activities with a rostered adult. There they can do some craft, discuss and ask questions, watch a video... or go to bed. Adults have their sharing, study, prayer and ministry.
- 8:00 Leave for home in time to put children to bed.

Some groups hire babysitters. Others have parents take turns to babysit the children.

Note: Home groups are artificially-extended families. They should be designed such that they strengthen families rather than replace them. Home groups are not to make their members so busy or exhausted that they have no time to invest in their own families.

PREPARING THE VENUE

A venue should be comfortable and non-threatening. Chairs should usually be placed in a circle. Avoid having chairs behind each other if possible, as this encourages those sitting in them to be less involved.

People should also turn their phone off to avoid distractions.

THE WORSHIP TIME

It is appropriate to begin home group with a time of worship. However, in doing this, be sensitive to the feelings of new members and non-Christians in the group. These people will not know the songs or feel inclined to sing them. Use discretion – perhaps choosing not to sing at the open meetings to

which you invite new members. Having said this, it has been my experience that new people are seldom put off by worship provided they see it as being real, well done, and non-threatening to them. In fact, it can be a powerful witness in itself.

Certainly, it is in falling in love with God afresh in praise and adoration that we allow the Holy Spirit to work amongst us to uncover ministry needs, to lead us into truth and to empower us for service. Worship is therefore not just a sing-a-long or a song-singing session.

The worship leader should introduce the songs that are being sung with sensitivity and conviction. There are any number of ways to introduce a song to be sung.

These include:

- reading a few verses of Scripture
- explaining the relevance of the song
- inviting people to visualise or meditate quietly on God, God's character, God's promises etc. (possibly whilst music is being played gently)
- sharing an insight into one of God's truths.

Compare the following two dialogues used to introduce a worship song:

1. *“Right, stop mucking about. We're already ten minutes late in starting, so let's sing number 24. Who wants to lead us off?”*
2. (Whilst strumming the guitar, looking at people and smiling.) *“It says in Isaiah 44 that God is pouring out his Spirit on us. You may be feeling a bit dog-eared and a bit spiritually dry... so let's ask God in this song to anoint us with the fresh oil of God's Spirit.”* (Begin singing a suitable song.)

One is telling people to sing a song; the other is a lot more.

The first one or two songs should usually be up-tempo, joyful songs of worship. Don't inhibit clapping or expressive movements where they are an aid to worship. However, try not to let these things become mere routine. Seek to maintain a newness and freshness in worship. Remember to introduce new songs regularly to the group.

The person leading the worship should lead confidently and in tune! If you can't sing in tune, work with someone who can.

There are many ways to have a worship time which do not necessarily require the presence of a musician. Tapes of Christian songs are available which can be sung to. Other worship times need not involve music at all. People can be invited to meditate on a table setting of symbolic objects such as barbed wire twisted into a crown of thorns beside a red rose; or leaves, flowers or a glass of wine and a crusty loaf of bread. A candle can symbolise the refining purity of God's presence. Another technique involves reading a passage of Scripture and then asking people to pray a one-line prayer thanking God for a particular phrase that spoke to them in the passage, e.g. “Thank you God that we *‘have been brought near by the blood of Christ’*” (Ephesians 2:13). Alternatively you can simply read one of the Psalms and allow time for silent worship. (Psalms 8, 19, 23, 32, 34, 40, 46, 51, 63:1-8, 84, 103 and 139:1-18 are just some that you might choose from.) Encourage variety. Be flexible when leading the worship section. Remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. It may be appropriate to slip into a time of prayer or even ministry during this time.

THE WARM-UP (OR ICE-BREAKER) ACTIVITY

Warm-up activities at the start of a home group meeting can be anything that will help people relax, smile and get to know each other. It can be as basic as a chat over a cup of coffee, or it can be a simple game. Look for ideas in books of youth or small group activities.

THE SPIRITUAL REVIEW AND SHARING TIME

This section can be in two parts.

- 1) The first is a general enquiry of everyone: ask how they are going. This should be as informal and non-threatening as possible. During this time, it may be appropriate to pray for someone or to offer a prayer of praise. Stay flexible.

If appropriate, ask other members in the group to respond to what has been shared so it's not just the leader who is responding, e.g. having checked that you are not betraying any confidentiality, you might say: "*Fred, you've had some experience with this issue. What encouragement can you pass on to Bill?*"

It helps promote Christian community when group members are invited to respond and encourage one another.

- 2) The second part asks specific questions of each other about their spiritual wellbeing. In this way, the group members are accountable to each other. (Be sensitive to new members and those who are new in the faith. Give them permission to be honest with their doubts or unbelief and to only share those things that they want to share.)

To save time, it is often best to do this section in groups of two or three. (Try not to combine the same two or three each time.) Invite them to ask each other at least one of the three following questions:

- 1) What opportunities have you had to serve others since last we met?
- 2) What new experience of God have you had as a result of prayer and Bible reading?
- 3) What would you like me to pray for you about both now and during the week?

This section should not be too drawn out, unless it is necessary. Diplomatically pull people back if they are digressing or taking too much time.

(It goes without saying that you should always treat anything that has been shared with you in confidence, and that diplomacy, sensitivity and respect are always required.)

THE TEACHING SEGMENT

We are to speak God's word... and that word resides in the Bible. Teaching should therefore be Bible-based.

When you teach the Bible studies, try and model the "inductive" teaching method in which you encourage people to share their ideas. At the end of the discussion, summarise the findings and highlight the key points. The best sort of teaching is that which is interactive in style and which results in action and ministry. Resist the temptation to speak too much or to teach too much in one meeting. Where at all possible, adhere to the 20:6 rule. No single study activity of one type should last longer than 20 minutes or be taught for more than 6 weeks (or 6 sessions).

Generally, the leader will:

- introduce the teaching
- step back and encourage discussion and interaction
- summarise the key points in conclusion
- encourage people to respond to the message, then lead into a ministry time.

It follows that any teaching segment should work towards a clearly defined aim. It should have a response (often leading to ministry afterwards). If you aim to achieve nothing, you probably will!

These two styles of Bible study work particularly well:

First:

- 1) The leader introduces the passage (typically but not always a chapter), giving its historical context.
- 2) Everyone reads the passage in silence for 5-8 minutes, jotting down or memorizing the 'Kingdom of God' principles (KOGPs) that they see in the passage. (The KOGPs are those principles God wants us to live by today.)
- 3) The leader then invites people to share what they feel the first KOGP is. This is then discussed. Note: Try to work progressively through the passage, but understand that you will inevitably jump forward and backwards a bit.
- 4) Everyone shares their ideas. This means that everyone is involved.
- 5) The leader keeps it going and does a quick, final wrap-up.

You'll find that everyone's contribution brings amazing results.

Second:

There is something good about hearing a passage of Scripture being read out loud. If you wish to do this, invite people to take turns to read a number of verses from the passage you are examining. Let people read as much as they are comfortable doing so, and to stop reading where there is a natural break (typically 5-10 verses). Then the leader simply asks the question: "What do you think is going on here and what is its significance for us today?"

The key is to get as many people as possible to contribute.

Some interactive techniques you might try include:

- a questionnaire
- ask people to grade themselves using a 1-10 scale on how they feel about an issue
- ask different people to research something and present it to the group
- ask people to discuss things in small groups and present a summary to the whole group

Don't forget to use visual aids where possible. People will remember John 15:1-8 if you physically prune a vine in front of them while you speak (perhaps labelling the bits you cut off with tags saying things like "complacency" or "prayerlessness", etc.).

It is important that you assume that your members have no biblical knowledge. Tell them where to find the passages you are talking on.

Ask everyone to always bring their Bibles, paper and a pen.

TEN STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING A BIBLE PASSAGE

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,
a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who
correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)*

- Step 1) Pray, asking God to show you the meaning of the passage you are about to study (Psalm 119:18).
- Step 2) Read the passage. If you are in a group, read it out loud. There is something special about hearing the word of God read to you (Revelation 1:3).
- Step 3) Ponder what it is that immediately impacts you from the passage. Don't be in too much of a hurry to be academic. Allow the passage to speak to you.
- Step 4) Do some research to uncover what the historical context was that gave rise to the passage. Who wrote it and what was going on that might help people understand why it was written? Understanding the context will also prevent you from using the passage in a way the original writer never intended.
- Step 5) What was being written about immediately before the passage you are studying? This may help you to understand its literary context.
- Step 6) Divide the passage up into its natural segments and go through each segment of the passage with steps 7, 8 and 9.
- Step 7) Define what sort of writing occurs in each section of the passage you are looking at. For example, is it:
 - exhortation (encouragement)
 - teaching
 - story
 - dialogue (the words of someone [not always a godly person])
 - prophecy (speaking God's word to his people)
 - analogy (imagery used to illustrate a theological truth)
 - apocalyptic (exhortation couched in the form of prophecy about the future written with rich symbolism)
 - prayer
 - praise
 - historical account
 - fictional story set in an historic setting to teach a theological truth
 - parable (a story that illustrates a truth).
- Step 8) Uncover the meaning of any difficult words, phrases or imagery used.
- Step 9) Ask, "What does the passage teach?" Remember: any one piece of Scripture should be examined against the general principles that can be distilled from **all** of Scripture. This will prevent you from being unbalanced in your understanding.
- Step 10) Ask, "How will you apply the principles of what you have learnt to your life?"

Please don't let these ten steps become a tyrannous legalistic rule that you must follow. Rather, let them become a discipline that you practise naturally, almost unconsciously. The primary concern is to allow God to speak us through Scripture and to apply God's Scriptural principles today with integrity.

THE BASIC RULES OF PREACHING

Small group leaders seldom preach; they facilitate discussion and learning. However, many of the skills required to preach are also those required of small group leaders when they teach. These, then, are the basic rules of preaching:

- 1) Find the most prominent sin or need in your community – and preach on it.
- 2) Find the Scriptural passage that speaks to this issue. Identify three key actions from the passage that your hearers can do to address the issue. Turn these three actions into simple and memorable headings.
- 3) Let your first sentence compel attention.
- 4) Design your first paragraph to elicit a commitment from your audience to stay listening because of relevance and interest.
- 5) Teach your three key action points.
- 6) Finish with a concrete challenge and action: “*Will you...?*”

Be creative, but remember that it is better to be clear than cute.

Remember:

- The aim is transformation, not information.
- The aim is relevance, not entertainment.
- Speak clearly and slowly. Use pauses and good, natural voice colour.
- Be natural and engaging in your manner. Avoid the deadly monotone and avoid rushing.
- Make good use of stories.
- Have your key points only on a piece of paper. Don’t read your sermon. Keep it vital and relational.

TEACHING MATERIAL

People will be much more inclined to apply themselves to the study of a subject if they have asked for it. It is therefore important to ask them what they want to study (being ready to give a number of options if necessary).

The best studies are those which:

- are Bible-based
- tell you how to teach it
- are simple
- result in some action.

Various resources have been used in home groups. Some groups have used the Sunday sermon notes from the Pastor. Others use the daily reading notes such as *Every Day with Jesus* or *Encounter with God* as their basis. The advantage of this latter technique is that the study can be tied in with the daily studies of the week, thereby reinforcing the habit of daily Bible study. It also means that the background work has already been done, which hopefully means that people will be more able to contribute at the meeting.

Some churches ask all their home groups to do the same series of studies over Lent, thus ensuring that the basics of the gospel are covered each year in small groups.

Different people prefer different styles of learning, so it is important to employ a variety of study types, e.g.:

A subject-orientated study:

Examples are Bible study lessons on subjects such as “Prayer”, “Guidance”, “Self-Control”, etc. If a home group requires a study on a subject, it is usually the job of the Small Group Coordinator to try to find one.

The study of a Bible passage:

A balanced diet of Old Testament, Gospels and Epistles is recommended.

No study at all:

Just a social night of fun during which relationships are built up.

Having a variety of lesson-types taught in a variety of different ways helps to maintain interest.

If possible, use suitable study material that is already prepared because it takes a lot of work to prepare a study from scratch.

Although some publishers encourage it, it is not generally necessary for each member to buy their own study book. This can be expensive. The person leading the study is usually the only one who really needs it.

THE MINISTRY TIME

The ministry time is simply the time when members of a home group pray for each other, asking God to meet the needs of those who want to be prayed for.

Ministry can occur at any time during a meeting, but it should typically follow on from the response to the teaching segment. The ministry time is in many respects the time that the whole home group meeting has been working towards. It is the time when you pick the fruit from what God has been growing during the meeting. Generally it occurs at two levels, a group level and an individual level.

Ministry at a group level is generally done first. This is when the whole group may wish to commit themselves to repentance, to showing practical love, to an increased commitment to daily prayer, or whatever. The whole group can pray for each other (in small sub-groups or all together). It is often a good idea to recap at the next meeting what transpired during the teaching and ministry time in the previous week to help affirm what God has done in people’s lives as a result of prayer and to check how they are doing.

Prayers for specific individuals may sometimes involve the whole group, e.g. everyone may lay hands on someone and pray for them. Some situations may be too private or too difficult for everyone present to be involved. In these situations, private or professional counselling is required. Use discretion.

PLANNING MISSION AND INTERCESSION

Every small group should have a mission that seeks to bless people outside their group. They may elect to support the chaplain at a local school.

Each group needs to continually be looking to invite new members along. Every now and then, place a pen and some slips of paper on an empty chair. Invite each member to write the names of people they would like to invite to the group on a slip of paper and place it in the bowl. When this has been done, ask: “What will each of us do this month which will make it more likely for these people to come to our home group?” Then spend some time organising social events, guest nights, barbecues or whatever.

Finally, pray for:

- the small group’s special mission work
- those whose names have been placed in the bowl.

Expect your intercessory prayer to be powerful in its effect. When you are all agreed on what specifically to pray for (discuss it first), take the authority we have in being able to pray in Jesus’ name – and pray confidently.

Encourage everyone to pray. Ask some people to prepare a prayer if you feel that it may help them initially. When praying, we should be more concerned with praying our prayers for other people than with our own shyness.

GOING HOME

There is no spiritual merit in meetings being long drawn-out marathons. People will tire of them if they are. Let people go home at a civilised hour.

LEADING PEOPLE TO FAITH IN GOD

Don’t be too quick to fill a prospective new Christian’s head with facts. People first need to know that you care about them. They will then be able to experience the genuineness of your faith and know that it is something that they want for themselves.

People don’t generally come to faith as a result of one encounter with the Gospel. It takes a number of encounters. Be patient. People are hungrier for relationships than for dogma.

One of the most powerful tools in bringing people to faith will be your readiness to share with people why it was that you became a Christian. Practise your ability to do this by writing out your testimony of how you became a Christian under the three headings:

- before I was a Christian
- how I became a Christian
- why I am still a Christian.

It should be brief, honest and contain no preaching.

The gospel

The gospel is essentially simple... and we should keep it simple when explaining it to prospective new Christians.

Essentially it is this:

- 1) God made the universe and humankind in order to share his love with us.
- 2) Although the order of creation points to the existence of God, God is not so obvious as to compel faith. God has given us free-will to accept or reject God's offer of a loving friendship.
- 3) Most of us have rejected God's ways and all of us have fallen short of God's standards of holiness. Our sin cuts us off from a Holy God.

But your iniquities have separated you from your God. (Isaiah 59:2)

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

- 4) God was not happy with this, so he came to earth personally as Jesus Christ to die and take the blame for our sin on a cross. Jesus paid the price for us.

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

- 5) God offers forgiveness, strength and a new beginning to everyone who accepts his offer of a loving friendship. God also promises us an eternal future.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. (John 3:36)

Ask if they want to have that new beginning and an eternal future to hope for themselves. If so, invite them to pray out loud to God in their own words. You should prompt them to pray in such a manner as to include the following:

- 1) That they want to be a Christian and to accept the gift of Christ's death on their behalf
- 2) That they are sorry for doing wrong things and that they want God to help them live as he wants them to
- 3) To thank God for his love for them.

Remind them that prayer is simply chatting with God as you would chat with a friend.

Reassure them that if they have prayed this prayer and meant it, God has forgiven them and will lead them on. They have become a Christian! They have taken the most important step of their life.

Follow-up

As a new Christian they will need to grow and learn more about God. Four important habits should now be developed which will help them secure their faith:

- 1) Read the Bible every day. Use a modern translation. Use a daily reading plan for new Christians (available at most Christian bookshops).

Why is the Bible (Scripture), the basis for our authority? The Bible says:

The Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

- 2) If possible, pray each day. Note what the Bible says about prayer:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

- 3) Meet regularly with other faithful Christians for teaching and encouragement. The Bible says:

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together**, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. (Hebrews 10:24-25)*

- 4) Live the Christian lifestyle, following the example that Jesus gave of sacrificial love.

PRAYING FOR PEOPLE'S FAITH TO BE EMPOWERED AND REVITALISED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is the empowering presence of God with us today.

When someone feels that their faith needs to be revitalised and their ministry made more effective, it is wholly appropriate to pray with them that they surrender afresh to God's Holy Spirit.

Before this is done, you will need to know some basic facts about the Holy Spirit so that you can teach others well and pray with them.

What does the Holy Spirit do?

The Holy Spirit:

- empowers Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11
- directs Acts 20:22
- teaches John 14:26
- convicts John 16:8-11
- gives love. Romans 5:5

Before Jesus left his disciples, he promised them that he would send them another counsellor (the Holy Spirit) who would help them. John 14:16

How did the first Christians become filled with the Holy Spirit?

The **gift** of the Holy Spirit is sent to us from the Father at Jesus' request. John 14:16

Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem after he left until they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:4-5

The disciples did so and were filled with the Holy Spirit during the Pentecost festival. Acts 2:1-4

The Holy Spirit was to be available to all Christians after Pentecost, throughout the ages. John 14:16

A lesson from the Samaritans in the book of Acts

The people of Samaria had given their intellectual assent to Christianity when Philip preached to them.

They had:

- received the word of God Acts 8:14
- believed it Acts 8:12
- been baptised in the name of Jesus Acts 8:16

...but something was missing.

The Holy Spirit had not equipped them with power for ministry. It was not until Peter and John prayed for them some days later that they received the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:14-17

If you feel that something is missing in your Christian life, submit yourself to God and invite the Holy Spirit to renew you afresh, perhaps at a greater depth than ever before.

Renewal

When someone becomes a Christian, they are born again of the Spirit and become spiritually alive. John 3:5-6; Romans 8:9

Perhaps we should reserve the term "Baptism in the Spirit" for this event. From that time on, there should be a continual series of renewals when we open more of ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual gifts

The Holy Spirit (sent by Jesus) gives each one of us spiritual gifts just as he determines. 1 Corinthians 2:1,4-11

It is the responsibility of each of us to use those gifts the Holy Spirit gives us for the benefit of others.

1 Peter 4:10

Spiritual gifts are freely given by the Holy Spirit for ministry in a particular situation and are not earned by “being good”. (That’s why they are called gifts.) A spiritual gift may be a supernatural gift such as some of those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11. Alternatively, it may be a natural gift that the Holy Spirit sharpens up for ministry (such as most of those mentioned in Romans 12:6-8).

What is not in doubt is that each of us can always exercise at least one gift for the common good.

Invite a person who wants their faith renewed to focus on God and worship, and to confess anything to God that needs confessing. Then simply ask God for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on their lives. No hype is needed.

If people are open to receiving the gift of praying in tongues, then pray with them for that gift. The “laying on of hands” may be appropriate at this time. Simply invite the person to:

- 1) praise God quietly to themselves
- 2) move their lips and tongue silently in sounds and words that they have never learned (trusting God with their instinct)
- 3) whisper these words out loud.

That’s all there is to it. The initial words and sounds may sound a bit babyish. They will gain form and maturity with practice.

Praying in tongues is not necessarily something that everyone can do, but those who have the gift find it a handy way of praying to God when they can’t find the right words to do so in English.

Invite the person seeking renewal to then thank God for their fresh renewal by the Holy Spirit and to continue exercising their gift(s) as much as their faith will allow.

COUNSELLING AND PASTORAL CARE

Here are some hints on effective counselling and pastoral care:

- Establish a relationship of care and trust. (Relationships are the most important thing in the universe. After all, God created the universe in order to establish a relationship with us.)
- Your care should be unconditional, and this needs to be reflected in your manner of speech.
- Run with their agenda. Seek to bring your love and God’s love into their agenda.

- Honour their agenda with your attention. Demonstrate your interest by:
 - listening
 - asking questions for clarification.
- Run with their feelings. (Gently encourage people to explore their feelings with you, for it is a sure indication of where their heart is.)
- A good way of doing this is to reflect back their feeling, e.g. *“Wendy... you sound a little sad (or apprehensive, worried, agitated, etc.) this evening. Is anything troubling you?”*
- **If in doubt, model what you think Jesus would do and say.**
- Respect confidentiality.
- Be a “wounded healer”. Know that you will be a victim of the grief (and joy) of those you counsel. Their situation will have a claim on your heart. Allow this and acknowledge the truth of your feelings to yourself.
- Know that the grief you have experienced in life is the very thing that gives you “authenticity” as a pastoral carer.
- Pray for people over the phone whenever possible and appropriate.
- Never judge or scold – however subtly.
- Listen to complaints but avoid taking sides. Genuinely extend a comment like, *“I’m sorry that happened to you.”* However, don’t:
 1. make excuses
 2. make a lot of promises
 3. become defensive
 4. make any promises that can’t be quickly carried out.
- Have on hand some referral numbers. (The ones below are examples of useful numbers in South Australia, at the time of writing):

Fire, Police, Ambulance	000
Alcoholics Anonymous	8346 3255 (24 hrs)
Alcohol and Drug information	8321 0822
Seniors Information	8323 1411; 1800 636 368 (toll free)
Genesis Pregnancy Support	8231 8500
Birthline	8363 1444
Crisis Care	131 611
Debt Line	8226 6771
Domestic Violence	1800 800 098 (toll free)
Gamblers Anonymous	8212 6933
Living Hope	8277 4033
Lifeline.....	131 114
Legal Aid	8205 0111; 8205 0155 (telephone advice)
Parent Support Group	8374 1809
Poisons Information.....	8204 6117
Rape and Sexual Assault	8267 8292
Youth Call.....	8277 4400
Women’s Information.....	8223 1244; 0401 989 860

- Refer people to a church counsellor or Pastor if you feel that more help is required.
- If you are asked something and you don't know the answer, say you don't know and, if appropriate, offer to find out the answer for them. Don't do everything for them, however, as you want people to take responsibility for their own life rather than become dependent on you.
- Many people with a difficulty will already know in their heart of hearts what their appropriate action (if any) should be. They often just need space to tell their story and time to voice what they know to be right in their situation. Simply be a friend.
- Be careful with advice. Offer it rarely, otherwise you will be in danger of living other people's lives for them.
- A good way to help people articulate what they want in a difficult life situation is to simply ask if they are happy with the current situation. If not, you may invite them to visualise what it is they do want – and for them to tell you. Gently ask that if the current style of living produces a situation they don't like, what changes can they make to their life to bring about the style of living they want.
- Taking responsibility for themselves allows people to choose to live in a way they would like to live. Often, if they live life in a way they would like it to be in our minds eye, it can become a reality.
- It is worth remembering that the only person anyone has control over is themselves. Other people can only ruin a person's life if they are allowed to do so. It is only they who can give other people the power to determine how they feel. They can always choose how to respond to any situation.
- Forgiveness is a choice. It allows a bad situation to no longer have an overwhelming claim on their emotions. Forgiveness really does set people free.
- Don't encourage people to blame others or to engage in any sort of vindictive action that will make their situation harder to heal.
- Whilst survivors of trauma should be encouraged to regain control of their situation, we should not be encouraging them to engage in control games over those they feel to be responsible for their trauma.
- Remind people that they are unique and precious to God. God is a God of forgiveness and new beginnings.

BE ABOVE REPROACH

Be seen to be above reproach. Don't get caught in what might be perceived to be compromising situations. Leaders should not be closeted alone in ministry with people of the opposite sex. Be wise. As leaders, there is a responsibility to those in our care that we should treat them with respect and have a Christ-like attitude towards others.

DON'T LET YOUR TIME BE WASTED

Whilst it is vital that we have time to care for and listen to people, there will be times when this can be taken advantage of. Your time can be so monopolised by someone that you have little time left for other people.

Make sure you stay in charge of your life so that if someone needs lengthy ministry, you choose to do it because it is appropriate, not because they demand it. Discourage any tendency for dependency. This may require you to gently but firmly draw limits with some people.

There are also occasions when people will know what is right for them to do but will choose not to do it. By choosing not to do it, they remain a “ministry case”. They may even choose not to do it because they like the attention that they get in ministry. Honest counselling (gently confronting people with the truth in love) and the placing of limitations on access to your time is often appropriate in these situations.

Every pastoral care situation will be different and will need to be handled differently. Whatever you do, however, guard your time and use it well.

HINTS ON DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

1) **When someone exhibits “super-spiritual” affectations or does not exercise spiritual gifts appropriately.**

When talking of spiritual things, it is important to be as “natural” and “unaffected” in your language as possible. People can easily feel ignorant or inadequate in the face of “super-spiritual” language and religious “styles” of speaking.

It may also be presumptuous to say things like “*God told me to*” because sometimes the hidden meaning is “*I want to do it and you’d better not stop me.*” As a leader, you must not be put off by this sort of language but check everything and not allow anything to happen that you are not happy with. This sort of language can also be a form of showing off... so avoid it and gently discourage it.

God is quite capable of working mighty acts through us without our spiritual affectations. Be natural and maintain integrity. You can only really say “*God told me*” in hindsight. Until it is proven, it should be a “spiritual hunch” which you are acting on in faith.

If someone feels that God might be wanting to say something to the group, the sort of thing to say is: “*I have a hunch that God might be saying... Is this right? Does anyone else get the same hunch?*” If it checks out with the leaders and the group, the leader will say something like: “*Okay, let’s accept that as something God wants to say to us and act on it.*”

It is a fundamental Scriptural mandate to check prophecy before it is accepted as such. If someone has a conviction or suspicion that God has shown them something that should be shared and then shares it with the group, it is the leaders in the group who have the responsibility of evaluating whether it is prophecy or not. This is an important safety check.

Be real and be natural.

It may not always be appropriate for people to pray out loud in tongues in a home group, e.g. when there are those present who may be alarmed or put off by it. Because of this, leaders should indicate when this gift may be exercised, perhaps by giving the lead or by inviting those who have the gift of being able to pray in tongues to do so when praying for a particular situation.

As a leader, you will be encouraging the group to exercise their faith and their gifts. There must always be an element of risk in this and there will be times when mistakes are made. Wise and careful leadership should ensure that these mistakes are not too damaging but are events from which people learn and grow. People should be able to feel that they can make mistakes in the safety of their home group.

Unless people are allowed to experiment in their faith and exercise their faith, they will not grow. As a baby learns to walk (undaunted by its falls), we need to learn to walk by faith.

2) When one person in the home group is particularly noisy and disruptive and treating it all as a joke.

Possible actions:

- Talk privately with the person... in love.
- Invite people to focus on God's holiness rather than ourselves. Confront people with the love of God. Smile, be gracious but be firm. Ensure that it is a holy time where people meet with God. Don't shout... but speak gently and deliberately with love.
- Have high expectations of the standard of behaviour you expect when worshipping and let these standards be known. If necessary, let them blow off steam earlier in shared games and frivolity; then they may be ready to settle down to a worship time. (Groups for young people often do this.)
- Plan with the potentially disruptive person before the meeting and give him or her a job (with which they are comfortable, e.g. reading a small passage of Scripture). Tell them of your expectations and what atmosphere you are seeking to build, i.e. show trust.

3) When people are not saying anything or becoming involved

Possible actions:

- Assess whether what you are presenting is relevant to your group. Your itinerary should come from the group rather than be imposed on the group.
- Check whether your leadership style is allowing enough interaction.
- Ask open questions that can't be answered simply with "yes" or "no", i.e. use words such as how, why, where, who, etc.

- Teach group members to be involved by asking selected people beforehand to share or pray something in the testimony or intercession time. This is also a good way of helping particularly shy people to become involved. (Be careful, however, not to force anyone to do something they are not yet ready to do. Know people's limitations, e.g. someone may not be able to read well and will not want to read in public).
- Ask people what they hope for in the way of involvement – and share what you hope for... and why.
- Whenever you teach or admonish, use Scriptural authority, not your own, i.e. not “*Because I say so*” but because “*God calls us to....*”
- Get people to write a concern, or single-sentence prayer, or a feeling on a piece of paper... and, if appropriate, to read it out or discuss it later.
- Ask people to assess their position on an issue, e.g. of the two people who went to the temple to pray, are you more like the Pharisee or the publican, or somewhere in between on a 1-10 scale with the Pharisee =1 and publican =10. Discuss the positions then pray and minister accordingly.
- Ask people to break up into pairs or threes to pray for each other or to discuss the relevance of a Scriptural passage and share their findings.
- Involve everyone in encouraging one another; e.g. by getting the group to list the gifts they see in each person on a piece of paper and stick them on the wall (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).
- Camp, barbecue, eat, bowl, skate, sail, hike, go on a retreat together, etc. Break down the barriers.

4) Lack of effectiveness:

Possible actions:

- There will always be reasons why things are not as effective as you would like. Even though these reasons may be valid, it is amazing how prayer changes things – so look after your spiritual health and keep in touch with God through prayer.
- “*Love covers a multitude of sins.*” If people are made to feel loved and welcomed... they will come. Love and genuine care is attractive to people.
- Don't be afraid of closing things down that are not working. Don't persist with a failing system. Reorganise or shut down. Home groups are there for the benefit of people, not vice versa.

TRAIN AND BE TRAINED

In summary, the job of a home group leader is essentially threefold:

- 1) To make fully-functioning disciples of Christ who are able to disciple others.
- 2) To train up an apprentice (letting them share some of the responsibilities in each meeting).
- 3) To continue to be trained as a leader and as a disciple of Christ.

There is no more important ministry. God bless you in it!