

Gifts of Freedom

SMALL GROUP OR CLASS LEADERS NOTES

Who Can Lead These Studies?

Just about anyone! The first skill needed to lead a small group is simply the ability to organize a group, and get that group to show up regularly. Being able to encourage others is a great skill to have for this, but that can come from others in your group as well, especially if they enjoy being together! A general understanding of the Bible is helpful, but not required. But you will need to be willing to invest some time in preparing for each meeting. This will include doing homework and making sure your meeting place is available and set up for your group's use, and that everyone has the book and any other materials they need for the study.

Small Group Basics

First, small groups need to be safe places. People need to feel that they can share without being judged or criticized. They also need to feel safe in *not* sharing. Someone in your group may not want to talk. They may simply want to listen. That's ok. Never force someone to speak if he or she isn't comfortable doing so.

Second, no one likes a "know-it-all." You, as the leader, won't have all the answers. Discussion and discovery are part of the process. It's helpful to include a seasoned Christian or two in your group who can offer their wisdom and help with tough questions.

Third, make sure you ask for a commitment from your class or group members to attend the study faithfully. This is important. The effectiveness of any small group study is greatly enhanced when group members' attendance is consistent and predictable.

Fourth, refreshments are good! People like to eat and talk. It doesn't have to be fancy, and you can recruit others to help provide the cookies and soda or whatever for the meetings.

Finally, consider the makeup of your group. While this study is most beneficial for new believers, there is much that can be beneficial for long-time Christians as well. You'll find that your discussions are more dynamic and meaningful if they include believers at a variety of stages in their Christian walk. You may also want to consider that it may be easier to create a safe, understanding environment where participants can be more open, if you have a more 'homogeneous' group, with all the participants having in common either sex, age, industry, or another strong commonality.

Before the First Meeting

First, determine when and where you will meet, and give advance notice. This can take various forms: a simple slip of paper you hand out to friends, current class or group members, an announcement during church, or even a poster for the bulletin board. Make books available as

Leader Tip: Never be afraid to say "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll find out!" Write down tough questions. Then find a pastor or chaplain or another mature Christian to help you find the answer for your next meeting.

soon as possible, or let potential participants know where they can purchase the books. (They can be purchased at a discount on our website <http://www.giftsoffreedom.com>)

Second. A week before your first meeting, make sure every group member has a copy of the book. Ask them to read Gifts of Freedom, Book One, Introduction and Chapter 1 (In the Beginning).

Leading the Sessions

Get things started – If this is a new group, then at the first meeting take 15-20 minutes go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. It's best to limit the introductions just to name and a couple brief facts (such as where they were born, where they work, the make-up of their family, how long they've been a Christian, etc.). If this is a continuing group, it's still good to open with some fun conversation starter. Time flies during this period so, as the leader, don't be afraid to lovingly but firmly remind people that the group needs to "keep things moving."

Open with prayer – Invite the Holy Spirit to bring understanding and wisdom to your study group members. Lead the prayer yourself the first week, invite others to lead in subsequent weeks, but don't force anyone.

Introduce the study – You might want to read the Opening paragraph from the Study Guide aloud to get things started. Perhaps something in the reading that has captured your attention. Then invite others (only those who volunteer) to share what they're hoping to get out of the study. Have someone in the group make notes about what people are expecting to gain from the study, so you can check along the way to see if the study is meeting the group members' needs.

Review the Study Questions – This is the main focus of each session so take your time and encourage participation as group members become comfortable sharing. Take time to read and discuss each question. If people have little or nothing to say about a particular question, don't dwell on it, but move on. This is perfectly fine as some questions will connect with the group, while others may not. Don't think you have to get through every question, you usually won't. The questions that *are* speaking to the deepest parts of the participants will prompt plenty of discussion. And don't forget – if you've invited the Holy Spirit into your study time, and are letting Him lead, He'll be at work in the group. He will be leading participants to talk about those things that matter most to their journeys of faith!

When inviting discussion on a particular question, be patient. Don't let silence make you feel uncomfortable. Many of these questions require some careful thought – even if the group members have done their homework ahead of time. And don't jump in trying to fill that silence. Let others lead whenever possible. This is the most important part of the study and it's important that group members feel like they have the space – and safety – to offer their thoughts.

Consider the Action Steps – Read and discuss this section of the guide. This is a great opportunity to have group members help each other examine the practical application of the chapter.

Leader Tip: Collect email addresses from every participant who has one (and everyone's phone number) during the first session. You can then send out midweek email reminders (or make phone calls) about the homework that needs to be done before the next session. Life gets busy and good intentions often give way to immediate concerns. Group members will appreciate a friendly reminder encouraging them to complete the weekly assignments.

Each person's "action steps" for a given week will likely be unique because each group member is in a unique place in his or her faith journey. Don't force group members to share if they're uncomfortable doing so. This is the most personal part of the study time and it's okay to allow members to reflect on these things quietly if that's what they need to do.

Give "homework" instructions – Tell group members to read the next week's assignment.

Close with prayer – Use the prayer in the study guide to open or close a time of prayer, inviting others to pray as they feel led as well.

Leader Tip: Keep in mind – prayer can seem intimidating to some people (new Christians and mature believers alike). This study can provide an exciting opportunity for them to learn about prayer. Always let group members know that it's okay to pray silently – don't require that everyone pray aloud. Those who are unsure will learn by listening. They'll discover the conversational nature of prayer through listening to others and will, hopefully, join in the prayer times when they are ready.