The success of any ministry rests upon small groups and the success of small groups rests upon the leader.

WANT TO LEAD A GREAT SMALL GROUP?

• Where real personal & spiritual growth takes place?
• Where group members connect with each other?
• Where group members want to come back?

The Ultimate Road Trip, A Guide to Leading Small Groups was written to help you lead any small group. We’ve worked to build people in their relationship with God for almost five decades. This book contains what we’ve learned…what to do and what not to do as the leader of a group.

YOU’LL LEARN HOW TO:
• Determine the needs of your group.
• Build close relationships.
• Create good questions.
• Teach in such a way that people’s lives are changed.

The Ultimate Road Trip provides the practical help you’ll need to point people to Jesus Christ. The creative format and real-life stories will teach, encourage, and entertain you…so the time you invest in preparing for your group will be as rewarding and enjoyable as the group itself. Here’s the info you need to build a successful small group.
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IT'S MORE THAN A MEETING.
LEADING A SMALL GROUP IS A GREAT ADVENTURE.

IT ISN'T WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE.

IT STARTS SMALL—BROWNIES AND STUFF. BUT AS GOD CHANGES YOU AND WORKS IN YOUR GROUP, IT BECOMES BIG, AS IN ETERNALLY BIG. IN FACT, YOUR SMALL GROUP CAN BE THE VEHICLE GOD USES TO CHANGE LIVES.
arely do we stop to think of the influence a small group can have on its members. It all starts with a simple, seemingly insignificant, decision by an individual to go to a small group meeting.

Many people get involved in small groups because they want friendships or fun. Most of the time they aren’t disappointed. Others come along for loftier ideals—to study the Bible and get to know God better. But few people understand at the outset how important a small group can become in their life.

Jesus knew the power of working with a small group. The twelve men in His group were like you—young, enthusiastic and teachable. They came from different walks of life. They had different strengths and weaknesses, and they certainly all needed a radical transformation that only God could accomplish.

The Lord’s unlikely small group went on to live lives fully devoted to Christ. They were known as those who turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).
These disciples guarded what was entrusted to them, passing it on to others. Two thousand years later we are the beneficiaries.

You’ll read many stories in this book of how God has worked through small groups. True, this is a book about leading small groups, but more importantly it’s about our glorious God and His desire to change you and your world through small groups. Many have faithfully gone before you forging the way.

1.2

STORIES OF THOSE WHO’VE GONE BEFORE

In the fall of 1968, ten women at the University of Texas began meeting together. They were a mixed group of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. Half were in sororities. Most were committed to the Lord, although one of them, Marajen, was very young in her faith and barely involved in the Campus Crusade for Christ movement.

They didn’t have a lot in common, but they came together to pray that God would change their lives and use them to change the world for Christ. How’s that for a lofty purpose?

That year they studied 1 Corinthians and slowly opened their lives to each other and the Lord. The encouragement and support in the group helped everyone, especially Marajen, who was struggling in her Christian life.

Eventually each woman had a personal ministry on campus. Marajen was radically changed through the encouragement and prayers of the others. She began sharing Christ in the Theta house and over time saw twenty-nine of her sorority sisters trust Christ.

Eventually each woman had a personal ministry on campus. Marajen was radically changed through the encouragement and prayers of the others. She began sharing Christ in the Theta house and over time saw twenty-nine of her sorority sisters trust Christ.

By the time all ten members of that original Bible study had graduated, God had answered their prayers in a big way. He had changed their lives and used them to make an impact in several sororities, plus a couple of dorms. Now it was time to influence the world beyond their campus.

Marajen decided to join the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ. Seven others also sensed God’s call to go into full-time Christian work. One became a high school teacher and had a profound impact on students’ lives. Another helped direct a major outreach in Atlanta.

Where are these ten women now? Nearly thirty years later, five of these women are still in full-time ministry. The others continue to walk with the Lord, ministering to their families and their communities. Over the years, thousands have come to know the Lord or been influenced because of their lives. Their small group started with the simple desire to grow in Christ and make a difference in the world. Only time will tell how many lives will be changed because of this small group.

In the fall of 1976, five men at the University of Alabama had a Bible study. Tuesday afternoons they met in a house near campus to study the Scriptures and talk about the small groups they were leading. The men had a lot of fun together—caravaning to Daytona Beach, FL, for a spring break evangelism conference, double dating, and playing hoops. The group lasted three years until graduation sent the men in different directions.

Today Ken and Scott are actively serving Christ in their businesses in Birmingham. Ken pioneered a ministry to young businessmen that later became a full-time ministry influencing thousands. Scott gives vital leadership to a

THE POWER OF A SMALL GROUP

“My brethren...let us plainly and freely tell one another what God has done for our souls. To this end you would do well, as others have done, to form yourselves into little companies of four or five each and meet once a week to tell each other what is in your hearts that you may pray for and comfort one another as need may require. None but they who have experienced it can tell the unspeakable advantage of such communion of souls. None, I think, that truly loves his own soul and his brethren as himself will be shy of opening his heart in order to have their advice, reproof, admonition and prayer as occasions require. A sincere person will esteem it one of the greatest blessings.” — GEORGE WHITFIELD (Whitfield travelled extensively throughout America in the 18th century and was a major figure in the Great Awakening in America and the evangelical revival that swept Britain.)
growing and effective church. David and his wife have a home ministry to unwed mothers in Atlanta. They’ve led some of these mothers to Christ. The other two men both serve Christ full time with a missions group.

It’s been nearly twenty years since the five of them met together amid their busy classes and activities at the University of Alabama. Each point to that small group as one of the highlights of their years at college. Their lives have never been the same, and their communities around them are different. It might have seemed like a casual decision back then to join a small group, but twenty years later the lasting effect of their experience begins to come to light.

Remember struggling Marajen from the group in 1968? Thirteen years later as a staff member with Campus Crusade, she spoke to a sorority at Texas Christian University where a sophomore named Judy sat in the audience listening intently. After hearing Marajen that evening, Judy decided to get involved in a Campus Crusade small group. She grew in her relationship with God and with the others in the group and developed a heart to influence women in the same way Marajen had influenced her. So she joined the staff of Campus Crusade.

In 1988 while working at Vanderbilt University, Judy gathered a few sophomore women to be in a small group. They were in different sororities, came from different states; they all had different majors; and only two had met each other before. Some were new Christians, while two had been Christians for many years. This was a diverse group.

When it was time for the first meeting, Judy made brownies, popcorn and served diet Coke. Surely that would break the ice. To her amazement the women passed by the food completely—no one ate a thing. They didn’t know each other. They didn’t talk much. And they didn’t even eat. Judy felt depressed. This group may never come together, she thought.

But Judy stuck with her commitment to build a group. At the next meeting, the women seemed more relaxed and conversation wasn’t nearly as strained. They actually laughed together. At the end of their second meeting, Judy knew they had the potential to become unified.

As the weeks passed, the women showed they cared by getting involved in each others’ lives and sharing in each others’ walks with God. They became friends and spent time together outside of the group time. Judy watched in amazement as the women grew from shy, nervous acquaintances who wouldn’t even eat brownies in front of each other to a close-knit group of friends who would scavenge her refrigerator at will!

At the beginning of my sophomore year, three friends and I began meeting together to encourage one another and hold each other accountable in our walks with the Lord. We really enjoyed each other, so we decided to room together the next fall. Over the next two years we had our own small group of sorts. We studied the Bible together, invited non-Christians into our apartment, and encouraged one another to honor the Lord with our lives. We even prayed that one day our husbands-to-be would actually like each other! More than twenty years have passed since we graduated, yet we are just as involved in each others’ lives. We circulate a round robin letter every two months and carve out time to take a retreat together once or twice each year. Even though we live apart and have fifteen children between us that keep us busy, we are committed to each other. Who would have thought our small group in 1973 would result in such lifelong encouragers?

I’m still in close contact with all the people in my first small group. We have gone through so much together, from dealing with school to the death and suicide of one woman’s mom and dad. This taught me how important it is to be there for each other.

I went to my first small group meeting as a freshman. I learned that Christ was God, and I was blown away! Maybe I’d heard that before, but it never clicked. After that I really began to grow.

Being in nursing school was stressful, and I saw some gruesome things. Each week I looked forward to our small group where I could share what was going on. It was such a good outlet for me to talk about life and death and what really matters. (I’m sure some of the other members left half-sick.)
At graduation the women signed up for their senior class trip to Panama City, FL. On the way out of town, they stopped by Judy’s house with a card that said, “Something is Missing ...” Inside the card it said, “YOU.” They kidnapped Judy and paid her expenses so she could be with them on their senior trip.

This group of women became more than just a casual group that studied the Bible. They continue to be friends and have served as each others bridesmaids. Their lives were changed, and they had significant ministries in others’ lives—from women in their own sororities to those they ministered to on mission trips to Mexico and Russia.

Like the groups at the University of Texas and the University of Alabama, this group of women from Vanderbilt continues to influence others beyond the campus. One is a new mother, one works with children, one is a Christian counselor, one is a staff member with Campus Crusade, one is in medical school pursuing her dream of being a missionary doctor, and another is in business. Their careers are as different as their personalities and backgrounds, but all of them do what they do for the glory of God.

Time and space do not permit us to tell all the great small group stories that could be recounted here. Most groups start without a great splash or fanfare. None were led by perfect leaders with all the answers. But somehow, all across the country, in all different generations, God has worked in the midst of small groups. Only God knows the inside stories of the many lives which have been influenced in small groups.

Our prayer is that someday you’ll add your small group story to those who have gone before you who have made a difference in this world. We pray we’ll hear the story of how a great God worked through a faithful and available servant to graciously change lives. Now it’s your turn.

Go ahead. Change the future.

**FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION**

1. Do you think God will do great things through your group? Why?

2. Share some of the ways you’ve been a beneficiary of those who have gone before you in their walks with the Lord. In what ways does this motivate you to pass God’s Word on to others?

3. George Whitfield said that a “sincere person will esteem it (a small group) one of the greatest blessings.” What reasons did he give? Do you agree or disagree?
SMALL GROUPS ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND WORLD HAVE HAD A TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE IN PEOPLE’S LIVES. SOME INDIVIDUALS HAVE COME TO KNOW CHRIST IN A SMALL GROUP, OTHERS HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED TO WALK WITH GOD, MANY HAVE MADE LIFELONG FRIENDS.

SMALL GROUPS HAVE ALSO INFLUENCED THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND THEM, CHANGING FRATERNITY HOUSES, APARTMENT COMPLEXES, RESIDENCE HALLS, AND CAMPUSES. SIMPLY PUT, SMALL GROUPS ARE POWERFUL INSTRUMENTS GOD USES TO CHANGE LIVES.
CHAPTER 2

DON'T TRAVEL ALONE!

2.1 THE POWER OF A SMALL GROUP

Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and other support groups all understand the power of small groups to change behavior. Sales organizations utilize small groups to train for and encourage better sales. And, of course, Christians have met in small groups for two thousand years.

Why are small groups so powerful? For one thing, they help diverse individuals, usually only marginally connected, grow together as friends and work together toward similar spiritual goals.

These groups are effective because individuals draw strength and support from each other. Rarely does anyone benefit spiritually from being a lone ranger.

Small groups not only change the lives of those in the group, but they often bring about powerful change beyond the group. Families take notice as the son or daughter that left for college comes back with a grow-
ing relationship with God. Week after week friends and roommates watch
this group get together at the end of the hall. They hear them laugh, watch
them study the Bible, and see them reach out to each other as friends.
It’s appealing and they may want to be part of it.

Most small groups work together to give something back to their campus
or community. They may put on an evangelistic event in their dorm or greek
house, feed the homeless, or help out with another need on campus. Never
underestimate the power of God working through a group to change lives!

**HOLLY’S SURPRISE**

I was a sophomore who really wanted to study the Bible but didn’t see
any need for being in a group. I figured the Christian life was me, God
and the Bible. In my mind, the small talk which often characterized small
groups was just a waste of time. But I decided to give it a shot. Much to
my amazement, I really enjoyed it. I needed the insights of others and their
friendship. I benefited both in my personal life and in my walk with the Lord.
Today, the women I got to know in that small group are some of my closest
friends.

2.2

**CRUCIAL ELEMENTS**

Though groups may include a variety of members, personalities and people
from a wide range of backgrounds, there are some elements which char-
acterize every effective Christian small group. A prospering small group will
have each of these elements: Christ-centered focus, community, each person
richly experiencing Christ, progressive life-change and outward impact. Each
area will be developed throughout this book.

1 **Quality Biblical Content**

This might come as a surprise, but small group Bible studies study the Bible.
Central to the Christian faith is the belief that God has revealed Himself to us
in His Word. But the ultimate goal of studying the Bible together is to point the
group to Christ, not to view Bible knowledge as an end in itself, but to see the
Bible as a map that leads us to Christ.

Your group needs to experience Christ, not just learn more about the Bible,
as valuable as that is. In no way do we want to move away from the Bible—it is
the Word of God—but as you study the Scripture you want to help your group
to see the person to whom the Scriptures point, that is Jesus. This is not to
look to find Jesus in every text but to look to discover how the text relates and
points to Christ and his redemptive work.

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to
them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself….They
said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he
talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures.’”
— LUKE 24:27, 32

“If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.”
—ISAIAH 40:8

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God
stands forever.” —ISAIAH 40:8

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness.” —II TIMOTHY 3:16

2 **Community**

Community is the sense within the group that members are a team, bonded
together as friends and committed to each other’s well-being and growth.
This doesn’t happen all at once, but healthy, growing groups have an increasing sense of community. Over time, individuals rejoice together, and share in sorrow together. These groups move from being “Tom’s group” to “our group,” as members begin to take ownership of the group. The leader can help facilitate this, but community is not primarily a leadership issue. Rather, it’s a oneness that becomes apparent when individuals come to value others in the group. Chapter 6 will give you insight into understanding community and some ideas on how to nurture this in your group.

3 Each Person Richly Experiencing Christ
As a leader your role is to stimulate group members to encounter and experience Christ for themselves. One of the most intimidating things that a small group leader faces is thinking that they have to have all the answers—the “map” memorized. Leaders don’t need to have all the answers, but they do need to be experiencing Christ for themselves and know how to point others to Him. This comes from knowing people’s greatest needs (chapters 4 and 5) having an understanding of how real change happens (chapter 5) and being skilled at asking good questions that engage the heart (chapter 8).

You want each person in your group to taste, see, and personally encounter Christ as you come to the Scriptures.

4 Progressive Life-Change
Successful small groups are about life-change. On the roadtrip of life, we all hit potholes, dead ends, construction zones, and pileups—sometimes twenty cars or more. As a result of the wear-and-tear brought on by life’s challenges, each week the members of your group show up in less than showroom condition, sometimes in need of some serious bodywork. Their condition may be obvious, or not so obvious.

As a leader (in need of your own bodywork, of course) you want to allow the Scriptures to expose our brokenness, our potholes, and then follow the passage as it points toward a solution and ultimately to a person, Jesus Christ. This is how life-change happens. If a group stops short of being a catalyst for life-change, it has fallen short of all God intends for the group.

5 Outward Impact
A small group needs an outlet to put into action what they are learning. As the group reaches out to others, at least two things happen: the group is strengthened and more lives are changed. Seeking to make an impact is a difficult step for many groups because it’s safer to become ingrown. But virtually all groups need to take the key step of turning the focus of the group from “getting” to “giving.” We’ll talk more about this in Chapter 10.

MISSY’S FRIEND
Tonya knew that as she and Bill got more and more serious in their dating relationship they would run into some intense temptation. They both decided to honor God in their physical relationship and part of doing that was having someone to whom they were accountable. Tonya asked me to be that person. Every week when we got together to talk, she knew I would ask if she and Bill had kept their hands off each other. It’s not that I was responsible for their success, but I could remind her of the decision she and Bill had made to remain pure. And I could pray for her and Bill. We all got to attend their wedding—it was a great day!

GREG’S GROUP
I remember the awkward tension in that first group. Some guys looked like they were dying just being in the room. Looking back on it, I would have paid five bucks for someone to crack a joke and break the mood. That all changed over time as the guys got to know each other. Two months later the guys were up half the night planning a creative date with a women’s group. I couldn’t believe they were the same bunch of guys.

TODD’S LINE
When leading a small group, nothing beats the feeling when someone says, “I wouldn’t be where I am today without you.”

RICK’S INFLUENCE
One day I asked the men in my group, “Who has been the most influential person in your life, apart from your parents?” One of the guys looked straight at me and said, “You’ve had the greatest impact on my life.”

KIRSTEN’S DATES
The seven of us decided to have a fun night so we asked seven guys along. We called it “Rotate-a-Date.” We planned seven different activities for the night—dinner, ping pong, singing with a guitar overlooking the city, etc. For each activity we had a different date. Maybe it’s a record worthy of Guiness...seven dates in one night!
2.3

WHAT TO EXPECT

Of course, there is no way to predict the outcome of your small group. Students in your group might sit at your feet and hang on your every word, or they may hide in the closet when they hear you come to the door to remind them about the Bible study. They may laugh at your jokes and eat your brownies, or they may listen politely and leave quickly. You just never know what will happen. You can, however, expect at least four things to take place.

1 Expect it to take time for your group to grow in maturity and commitment. There are no shortcuts to maturity. You'll probably feel frustrated by the sporadic attendance in your group, which is often true of new groups. Group members’ commitment will develop as they grow in their relationships with the Lord and get to know you and each other. It takes time.

2 Expect to face challenging situations. Leading a small group is always a challenge. Things will happen in group that you won’t expect. For instance, what if no one shows up, or perhaps a group member’s personal crisis diverts you from ever getting to the lesson. Sometimes individuals in the group will be a challenge to you. When you step out in faith to be involved in the lives of your group members, you never know what you’ll encounter. Trust God to work on your behalf.

3 Expect gratifying results. Most group leaders find the experience of leading a small group tremendously rewarding. You may have the joy of seeing people come to Christ or begin to walk with the Lord. The apostle John wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

4 Expect to grow in your relationship with God. Sometimes the group leader will learn more from leading than the individuals in the group. By stepping out in faith, you can expect God to change your life as you minister to others because you’ll understand Scripture better, and you’ll see how biblical truth is worked out in a person’s life, including your own.

What do you expect from leading your small group? Some small group leaders are fearful their small group will never go anywhere. Other leaders are sure their group is destined for glory. Both views are incorrect to some degree at least. God reminds us in Psalm 127:1, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.” Your small group will only be powerful if God builds it. Be honest about your expectations, but place them under God’s control and abide in Him as you lead.

Naive Statements from New Group Leaders

“Surely everyone will come back each week.”
...Yeah, unless they have a date, homework, laundry, need a nap, “forgot,” etc...

“Everyone will be best friends from the start.”...Not likely when they’re still using name tags and all.

“Leading a group will take about a half hour a week.”...Yeah, right.

“Everyone in the group will think I’m brilliant.”...Guess again, Einstein.

Influencing your small group takes spending time with them. However, no matter how challenging your group gets, God will use you as you seek Him and step out in faith. Paul reminded the Corinthians, “Al-ways give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

3 Expect gratifying results.

Most group leaders find the experience of leading a small group tremendously rewarding. You may have the joy of seeing people come to Christ or begin to walk with the Lord. The apostle John wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4).

Not only will you likely find leading a group profitable for God’s kingdom and beneficial to you personally, but it can be a lot of fun as well.

4 Expect to grow in your relationship with God.

Sometimes the group leader will learn more from leading than the individuals in the group. By stepping out in faith, you can expect God to change your life as you minister to others because you’ll understand Scripture better, and you’ll see how biblical truth is worked out in a person’s life, including your own.

CONCLUSION

So, why travel in a small group? God has created us with a need for each other. We need each other for encouragement, and, hey, it’s much more fun than being alone. Even Barbara Streisand knows that people who need people are the luckiest people in the world. What? You don’t know that song? Ask your parents.

God never intended us to live the Christian life alone. Each of us are a
unique part of the body of Christ. God created us to use our strengths and abilities to build each other up. In small groups, different members of the body of Christ work together to encourage each other and build up the entire body of Christ. There’s something unique about how God works in and through a group.

FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION

1 What do you expect from leading a small group? Be honest. How will these expectations influence how you lead the group?

2 Christian small groups share much in common with many secular small groups. What makes Christian small groups distinctively different?

3 Look at the five elements of a good small group. Think about the groups you’ve been involved in. Which of these five elements were present? Which were most meaningful to you? Why?

4 The believers in Berea (Acts 17:10–12) would be great people to have in your small group. What can you do as a leader to help encourage this kind of attitude toward the Scriptures?
"WHAT IF THE GROUP CLAMS UP... OR GOES FROM TANGENT TO TANGENT... OR FALLS APART COMPLETELY? IT HAPPENS SOMETIMES."

"WHAT IF SOMEONE ASKS ME A QUESTION I CAN'T ANSWER?"

"WHAT IF SOMEONE KNOWS MORE THAN I DO? THEY MIGHT."
Leading a group can be frightening if you focus on the millions of things that could go wrong. Don’t worry. God takes pleasure in using people who don’t have all the answers, but who are in the process of learning. The Bible is full of stories of how God used imperfect people to accomplish His great purpose.

What, then, does it take? Perfection is not required. If it were, none of us could lead a small group. But all small group leaders need to be in the process of developing certain qualities: godly character, compassion, competence, and commitment.

1 **Authentically Experiencing Christ**

The character of a group leader is crucial. It’s inevitable that members in your