

A SMALL-GROUP LEADER'S MOST IMPORTANT JOB

By Jim Egli

A religious expert wanting to cut through the confusion of 613 Old Testament statutes came to Jesus and asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jesus gave his famous reply, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:28-32).

Like the scribe who came to Jesus, I was a confused small-groups expert just a few years back. I kept hearing advice from a plethora of small-group authors and speakers, each promoting different methods and models. All of them were confident and persuasive, but their contradictory theories couldn't all be right. Someone needed to do cut through the confusion by doing serious, scientific research on what really creates healthy, growing small groups. We needed to look past the models to discover the key underlying principles.

I wanted to get to the bottom of things. I wanted an answer to the question, "What's the most important part of leading a small group?" I completed a Ph.D. degree and did extensive statistical research involving over 3,000 small-group leaders in more than 200 churches to probe that question, and the answer I found was surprisingly simple.

The most important dimension of leading a group is your prayer life—your connection to God as a leader.

What You Do in Secret

Along with my research partner—Dwight Marable, director of Missions International—I probed hundreds of items, asking questions about group dynamics, leadership behaviors, and group meetings. But the highest correlations to small-group health and growth were to the unseen dimensions of a group leader's relationship with God. Out of the hundreds of questions we asked, the leaders' answers to the following questions yielded the most pivotal results:

- How consistently do you take time for prayer and Bible reading?
- Are you praying daily for your non-Christian friends to come to know Jesus?
- How many days in the past week did you pray for your small-group members?
- Do you pray for your group meetings in the days leading up to it?
- How much time on average do you spend in daily prayer and Bible reading?

The leaders whose answers revealed a strong relationship with God had groups that were healthier and faster growing. These groups experienced a deeper level of care between members, had a clearer sense of mission beyond their group, and produced more leaders and new groups.

However, the research revealed that the biggest difference a strong prayer life makes comes in the evangelistic effectiveness of a small group. One question that we asked group leaders was how many people had come to Christ through the influence of their group or group members in the past nine months. The contrast between leaders with a strong prayer life and a weak prayer life was startling.

Eighty-three percent of leaders with a strong prayer life reported that at least one person had come to Jesus through the influence of their group, whereas only 19 percent of leaders with a weak prayer life could say the same. It didn't surprise us that leaders with a growing relationship with God had groups that were bringing more people to Christ, but it was shocking how much of a difference it makes. Leaders with a strong prayer life have groups that, on average, have more than four times the evangelistic impact as groups led by leaders with a weak prayer life.

How Do You Prepare for Your Small-Group Meetings?

The biggest surprise in our research concerned how small-group leaders prepare for their group meetings. Two questions that we asked leaders were: How much time do you spend on average preparing the lesson for your small-group meeting? and How much time do you spend on average praying for your small-group meeting?

Much to our surprise, the research revealed absolutely zero correlation between time spent preparing the lesson and whether the group was growing in any way. In other words, when you statistically compare hundreds of leaders spending two hours preparing their lessons with hundreds of leaders spending five minutes preparing their lesson, there is no difference at all between those two groups in whether their groups are bringing more people to Christ, adding new members, or producing more leaders.

But there are very high correlations when it comes to whether the group leaders are praying for their meetings.

Most leaders reported spending significantly more time preparing their lesson than they did praying for their meeting. They didn't realize that the time spent preparing their lesson or questions makes little difference, while time spent praying for their members and their meeting makes a big difference. Apparently things depend more on God than on you. Or, put another way, it's more important to prepare your heart than it is to prepare your notes.

How about you? Do you spend more time lining up your lesson, or do you take more time praying for others and inviting God to work in your meeting?

I'd like to challenge you to try an experiment for the next three meetings. Take more time praying for your members and asking God to work in your meeting than you take preparing your lesson or discussion. I think you'll see a noticeable difference in how your meetings go.

This discovery changed a lot of things for me. I spend significantly more time praying as a small-group leader now and less time going over the group lesson ahead of time. What we learned also changed how our church does small-group leader training. We spend less time training people how to prepare for and lead a discussion and more time teaching people how to grow in their relationship with the Lord.

Why Is Prayer So Important?

Why does the prayer life of the leader make such a difference in the health and growth of a small group? The research doesn't tell us why, it only tells us that a very strong correlation exists. But I don't think it's hard to figure out.

Jesus said in John 15:5: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing" (NLT). When we are connected to Jesus, his life is flowing through us. The leader who is taking time with Jesus has a secret power source. He or she is receiving direction. Christ's grace, peace, compassion, and power are flowing more freely to and through their group. Perhaps the group members are also connecting to Jesus more strongly and consistently themselves.

Basically, our research statistically proved John 15:5! If you want to see Jesus' life flowing in your small group, stay connected to him!

Is That All?

Our research revealed four critical dimensions to small-group life and leadership. We have labeled them with four action verbs: Pray (your prayer life), Reach (reaching out to those that need Jesus), Care (showing practical love to one another), and Empower (giving away ministry and leadership to others). Basically, it comes down to loving God and loving others.

What's the most important part of leading a small group? Our research revealed it's not about your abilities, your personality traits, or getting extensive training. It all comes down to relationships with God and others. Or, as Jesus once said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." And, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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