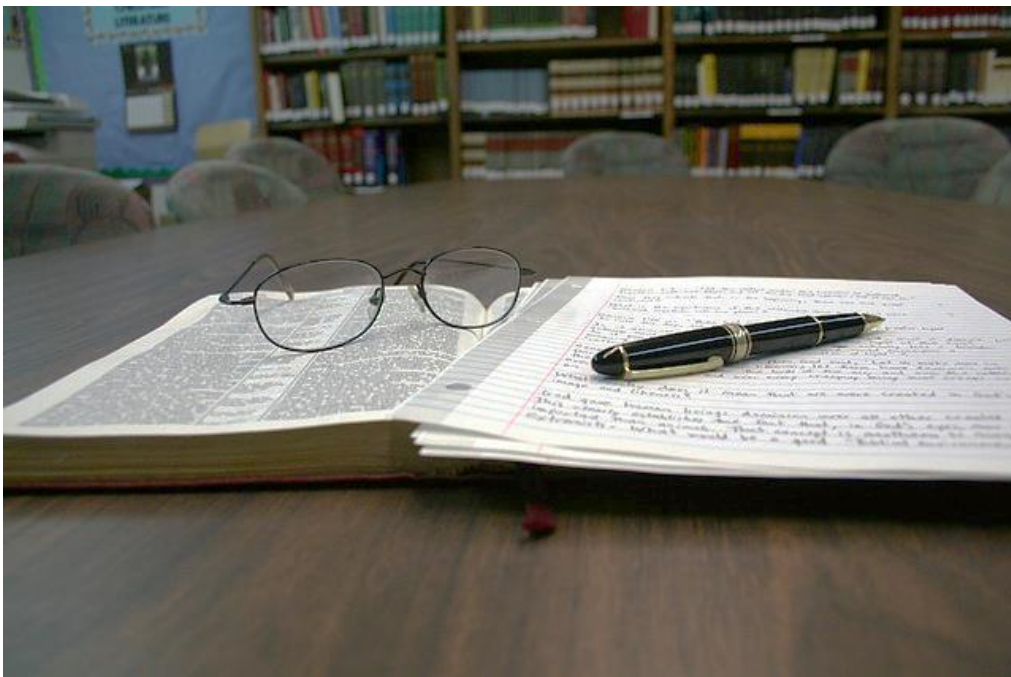


You Can Lead an Adult Study

By Debbie Kolacki of

PRC– Practical Resources for
Churches

www.prcli.org



Benefits of study groups

What are some of the reasons a church should offer study groups?

- **Members grow in their faith**
Listening to other points of view or different interpretations of scripture makes a person realize their concept of God and their faith is not the only one out there. They'll begin to see the rich diversity of Christians and realize that people who think differently about things can still be part of a church family as well as the wider community of Christians.
- **Provide opportunities for questions and dialogue**
Traditional worship can be very one sided. When the sermon is delivered, the people in the pews don't usually get to ask questions or express their opinions as they do in a study group. People also retain information better when they are actively involved in a discussion rather than just listening to someone talk.
- **Build relationships and support members**
In a small study group, members learn what it is to be part of a Christian community and get to know more about the people in their group. Those who may be going through difficulties will find support and encouragement from others.
- **Members encourage each other in their faith and pray for each other**
A study group provides a place where people can share their faith stories and often find their faith is strengthened by hearing from others how God has worked in their lives. In most groups, members pray for each other as well.
- **Can lead to ministry opportunities**
Often, as members discuss their faith, they feel called to put it into action in some way and this can lead to the group joining in an existing ministry or creating a new one. Those in the group may feel the Spirit calling them to do more than get together for discussions and fellowship.

Adult study groups can be one type of small group that your church has. Small groups can include prayer or meditation groups, service groups, musical groups, and more. Most small groups include some of the benefits of study groups that were mentioned.



Putting a Group Together

Inviting and Publicizing

Get advice on selecting study material and an appropriate time for your meetings as well as approval for starting the study from your pastor and/or whatever committee in your church has oversight for adult study. Ask your pastor and other church leaders to help you promote the group at all appropriate church meetings and gatherings.

Start publicizing the study well in advance of your starting date. Take into account the time necessary to order and receive study materials.

When inviting potential participants, be clear as to what the study involves, such as:

- the dates the group will meet and the starting and ending times,
- the amount of time required each week for preparation,
- whether the study is limited to one gender or age group and whether those with limited Bible knowledge may participate,
- how and when to sign up for the group, and
- what study materials are required, how these may be obtained, and whether participants will be responsible for the cost of the materials.

The most effective way of getting people interested in joining your study group is a *personal invitation*.

The group leader or a representative should make announcements during the worship service of the details listed above, as well as give personal testimony of the benefits of participating in such a group. Have the study materials on display after the service, as well as someone available to answer questions and sign up new members. Do this for several weeks in a row.

Publicize the study in the weekly bulletin and church newsletter, as well as on flyers or posters around the church building. Have information available on the church website and send out initiations via e-mail.

You can visit the SmallGroups.com website for a sample form: church-wide announcement for small groups.



Purpose of the Group

Consider taking a survey to get input as to the particular area to study. See the next page for a sample survey. You can also use a free website like Survey Monkey to do an online survey such as this one.

Write a mission statement for your group before the study begins or have the group come up with their own mission statement which includes the group's core purpose and focus. Suggested goals for the group could include: deeper understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith, closer relationship with God, closer relationships with group members, faith having a greater impact on how individuals live their lives, and connecting the group with the mission of the congregation.

There are a wide range of study topics to choose from. Some questions to ask to help you decide on a topic include:

- Should the study be an introductory course or a serious study with homework?
- Should we study one book of the Bible?
- Should we study one theme that runs throughout the Bible?
- Should we focus on one topic, such as prayer?
- Should we do a study specific to a time in the church year (Advent, Lent)?
- Should we have a book discussion group?
- Should we have a video study?
- Should we learn about spiritual practices?
- Should each member purchase a study book or will we have reproducible materials?
- Should we study current events and how they relate to a life of faith?

ADULT STUDY GROUP SURVEY

The Christian Education Committee is planning to offer one or more adult study groups. We would like to know what topics are of interest to you and the days and times you would prefer for an adult study group. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Please rate your interest on a scale of 1 (definitely interested) to 5 (not interested).

<u>Topic</u>	Definitely Attend	Probably Attend	May Attend	Probably Not Attend	Would Not Attend
Bible study based on lectionary	1	2	3	4	5
Bible study on a specific theme	1	2	3	4	5
Bible lessons related to current events	1	2	3	4	5
Works of religious writers	1	2	3	4	5
Other religions and beliefs	1	2	3	4	5
Book discussions	1	2	3	4	5
History and beliefs of our denomination	1	2	3	4	5

Preferred Times

Sunday morning before worship	1	2	3	4	5
Sunday morning after worship	1	2	3	4	5
Sunday evening	1	2	3	4	5
Weekday morning	1	2	3	4	5
Weekday afternoon	1	2	3	4	5
Weekday night	1	2	3	4	5
Saturday morning	1	2	3	4	5

Additional comments or suggestions

Name _____ Phone number _____
 E-Mail Address _____

Size of the Group

In general, the ideal size of a small group is between 4 and 15 people. The available space for meeting may impact the number of participants. Israel Galindo in his book *How to Be the Best Christian Study Group Leader Ever in the Whole History of the Universe* includes detailed information about “group math” or which size groups work best for different types of discussions.

If you have a group of six or more people, you might want to break the group into smaller groups of 3-5 people for discussion or other activities. This gives individuals more time to talk and also encourages shy individuals, who may find the smaller group less intimidating.

When?

Most groups meet once a week or once every two weeks. The study materials as well as members’ schedules will help determine this.

Meetings usually last between one to two hours. Be sure to allow time for socializing as well as time for sharing and prayer concerns each week.

Fall and spring studies usually result in more participation than do summer sessions. However, summertime may afford some persons with seasonal careers – such as school teachers - an opportunity to attend. Try not to have your group sessions run too closely into busy holiday seasons or end of school year activities.

Where?

You may wish to meet at your church or meet in someone’s home. Make sure your meeting place has adequate space, comfortable seating, good lighting, and tables if necessary. If you’ll be using videos or DVDs, make sure you have the proper equipment so that everyone will be able to see and hear without difficulties. You might also want to consider having an online study or a study that meets both online as well as in person.

Who?

Depending on the size of your church and the study materials being used, you may want to limit the group to either men or women or to a certain age group. Consider offering childcare if that is a concern of group members. Older members of the group may need help with transportation to meetings.

Short Term or Long Term?

A study group may meet for 4, 6, 8 or more sessions and then be discontinued. Long term studies may last for as much as 26 or 34 weeks. Seasonal groups, such as Advent and Lenten studies, are completed within a set time frame. Some small study groups may be ongoing and may meet for a number of weeks, complete a study, and then break for several weeks before starting a new study. There are also open groups which have a different topic for each session and which do not have attendance requirements. People are free to attend whenever they wish.

Selecting materials

Purchasing Prepared Curriculums

- Consider the study materials that are available from your denominational publisher first, as these will probably be the closest fit to the theology and ideology of your church.
- Get input from your pastor, Education Committee, and church leaders for suggested topics and studies. Are there people in your congregation who would be interested in a traditional Bible study, a study of spiritual practices, a study dealing with faith and current events, etc.?
- Are the members of your study group willing to do “homework”?
- Do you want a curriculum that includes a workbook for each group member or would you prefer reproducible handouts?
- There are downloadable curriculums available on the internet. Some of these deal with the Christian faith and how it relates to weekly news events.
- Many groups enjoy using materials that utilize videos or DVDs.
- Carefully examine the study materials you are considering for your group before making a decision.



Publishers of Study Materials

Augsburg Fortress (ELCA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
www.augsburgfortress.org 800-328-4648

Bluefish TV (video studies)
www.bluefishtv.com 972-560-5600

Chalice Press
www.chalicepress.com 800-366-3383

Christianity Today (evangelical - downloadable studies)
www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies 877-247-4787

Church Publishing/Morehouse (Episcopal)
www.churchpublishing.org 800-672-1789 (order through Cokesbury)

Cokesbury (United Methodist, Episcopal, American Baptist, and others)
www.cokesbury.com 800-672-1789

Concordia Publishing (Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod)
www.cph.org 800-325-3040

David C. Cook
www.davidccook.com 800-323-7543

Faith Alive Christian Resources (Christian Reformed Church)
www.faithaliveresources.org 800-333-8300

MennoMedia/Herald Press (Mennonite)
www.mennomedia.org 800-245-7894

Gospel Light
www.gospellight.com 800-446-7735

Gospel Publishing House (Assemblies of God denomination)
www.gospelpublishing.com/store/index.cfm 800-641-4310

Great Commission Publications (Orthodox Presbyterian Church & Presbyterian Church in America) www.gcp.org 800-695-3387

Group Publishing
www.group.com 800-447-1070

Judson Press (American Baptist)
www.judsonpress.com 800-458-3766

Kerygma
www.kerygma.com 800-537-9462

LeaderResources (multi-denominational; began in the Episcopal Church)
www.leaderresources.org 800-941-2218

Lifeway (Southern Baptist)
www.lifeway.com 800-458-2772

Paraclete Press
www.paracletepress.com 800-451-5006

PC (USA) Store (Presbyterian Church USA)
www.pcusastore.com 800-533-4371

RightNowMedia (video streaming for Bible study)
www.rightnowmedia.org 972-560-5600

Sparkhouse (Ecumenical branch of Lutheran Church ELCA publisher)
www.wearesparkhouse.org 877-702-5551

Standard Publishing
www.standardpub.com 800-543-1353

The Thoughtful Christian (downloadable studies)
www.thethoughtfulchristian.com 800-554-4694

United Church Press (United Church of Christ)
www.unitedchurchpress.com 800-537-3394

Vision Video (video studies)
www.visionvideo.com 800-523-0226

Upper Room
www.upperroom.com 800-972-0433

Discounted products from many different publishers are available from Amazon online at www.amazon.com and from Christian Book Distributors at www.christianbook.com and 800-247-4784.

The Bible as the Primary Study Book

The African (or Lambeth) Bible Study Method was introduced by the African Delegation to the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in 1998. You can find an outline for using this method by visiting the African Bible Study Method page of the Takoma Park Presbyterian Church. It is a slow and prayerful way of looking at a scripture passage which is based on the spiritual practice of lectio divina.



The Inductive Method of Group Discussion is described in Thomas G. Kirkpatrick's book *Small Groups in the Church: A Handbook for Creating Community*. This method uses the group's own resources and attempts to let the material speak for itself. The inductive method moves from observation to interpretation to application.

The Serendipity Bible for Personal and Small Group Study contains information and questions that can be used in studying a particular passage or book of the Bible or a particular topic.

In *Small Groups: Getting Started* by Suzanne G. Braden and Shirley F. Clement the authors state that "you may find your group most energized when they are helped to approach scripture in personal and imaginative ways, and when they are willing to clarify their thoughts and experiences by sharing them with the group." The authors give a number of methods and questions to use with a selected scripture passage.

Icebreakers

An ice-breaker is an open-ended question used at the beginning of a groups' discussion time which does not have a right or wrong answer. The leader should answer first to model the type and length of response. Then go around the circle; if someone wants to pass, let them, but encourage everyone to answer. The icebreaker question and resulting life-sharing time helps prepare people's hearts and minds for discussing the study topics and relating them to their faith. A good icebreaker should help the group get to know one another better and encourage group members to listen to each other.

Icebreaker Ideas

- What do you love doing more than anything in the world?
- If you could make a good living doing anything at all, what would that be?
- If your life were a movie, would it be a drama, a comedy, or a horror film?
- If you could ask God one question, what would it be?
- If you could be any type of animal on the earth, what animal would you want to be?
- If you could be a fly on any famous person's wall, which famous person would that be?
- What did you have for breakfast this morning?
- What is your middle name?
- What is your favorite cuisine?
- What is your favorite time of day?
- If you won \$1 million in the lottery what would be the first thing you would buy?
- If you could go on a vacation anywhere in the world, where would you go?



Expectations and responsibilities

Group Guidelines and Covenants

Share with your group guidelines that are for the benefit of all. These rules include:

- Confidentiality – What is said within the group stays within the group.
- Purpose – We are not a therapy group but a group where all can grow in faith.
- Schedule – Each session will start and end on time. Let the leader know ahead of time if you won't be able to attend.
- Equality – We are all equal; no one is expected to be an expert on the topic.
- Acceptance – Each person is accepted by the rest of the group just as they are.



Consider creating a covenant with your group and making copies for everyone in your group.

You can download a sample Group Covenant as well as other related documents on the *How to be the Best Christian Study Group Leader* page of the Judson Press website.

Division of Tasks

Don't try to do everything yourself. Ask other people to help by bringing food, making the coffee, calling absent group members, etc. Ask everyone in the group to invite friends to the group. Invite members to take turns leading the group. Ask someone to organize social events in order to build closer relationships within the group. Ask group members to offer transportation to those who need it.

Prayer

Make prayer an important part of your group. Pray for your group. Have group members pray for each other. You might want to assign each member a different prayer partner every week. Allow time for prayer concerns either at the beginning or end of your meetings.

Encourage members to participate in prayer and lead the prayer time. Some suggested ways to pray with your group are:

- After people have shared prayer concerns, give them the following directions: “Pray silently for the needs of the person (a) to your right, (b) to your left, (c) across the table from you, and so forth.”
- Go around the circle and have each person thank God for something: “God, I thank you for . . . ”
- Ask different group members to prepare a prayer for an upcoming meeting. Suggest that they write something themselves or use a short passage of scripture, a prayer from a devotional guide, or a hymn.
- Put pictures and photos on a table and then ask group members to choose one that best expresses how they have felt God’s presence in their life either now or in the past.

Leading discussions

The Role of the Group Leader

Although there are still some study groups where the leader is the “expert” and lectures the group, in most cases the group leader is there to facilitate discussion, not to lecture. People learn better when they are an active part of the learning process and spiritual growth occurs when members participate in discussions, evaluate the study material, and come to their own conclusions.

Although the group leader does not have to be a Bible scholar, he or she should be familiar with the study material and plan an outline so that the meeting flows easily. However, don’t force the group to stick to your plan if the discussion goes in a different, but equally good, way. Sometimes the Spirit takes over and leads you in a different direction than you’d planned.

The group leader should review suggested questions and make notes on which should be covered. It is not necessary to cover all the material in a prepared curriculum and there will rarely be time to do so.

Don’t be afraid of silence.

Give everyone a chance to talk. Try to draw quiet members into the conversation by asking “Do you have anything to add?”

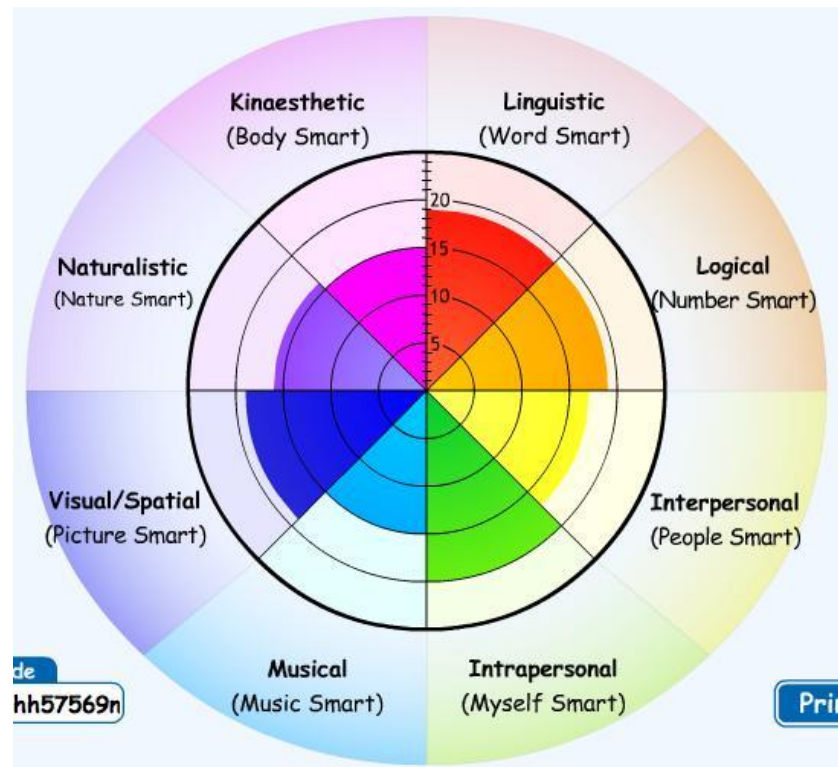
Relate the material covered to the lives of the group members. Consider challenging the group to put what they have learned during discussion into practice during the week ahead.

Being a Good Listener

An article by Michael C. Mack on the SmallGroups.com website lists “10 Ways to Be a Better Listener.” The tips include not monopolizing the conversation, trying to understand what the person is really saying, making sure there are no distractions, being careful of body language, and affirming what a person says.

Multiple Intelligences/Learning Styles

Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (learning styles) states that there is no one way to be intelligent and to learn, but rather there are at least eight different ways. Traditional Bible study methods have used only one or two of these intelligences, but a good study leader will try to incorporate as many of them as possible. In planning your small group study, consider including activities which appeal to those who are strong in the different intelligences.



Ask the right questions

Another article on the SmallGroups.com website, "How to Ask Stimulating Discussion Questions" by Joel Comiskey, emphasizes the importance for a group leader to ask the right questions. The author talks about the difference between asking open or closed questions. Closed questions only have one correct answer but open questions have more than one right answer and encourage discussion and sharing.

For example, in studying the story of Jesus calling his first disciples to follow him in Matthew 4:18-22, a closed question might be: "Where was Jesus walking when he spoke to Peter and Andrew?" There is only one answer: "by the Sea of Galilee." Some open questions would be: "How do you think Peter and Andrew felt when Jesus told them to follow him? How do you think you would have reacted if you were in Peter and Andrew's place and Jesus told you to follow him?"

Managing "Difficult" Personalities

Janet McMahon's article "Love the One You're With: How to Manage Difficult Personalities within Your Small Group" on SmallGroups.com discusses some of the personalities that present a challenge even to a seasoned study group leader. These are people who monopolize the conversation, people who don't participate in discussions, people who think they know everything, and people who give unsolicited advice.

It is sometimes necessary to interrupt a person who continues to dominate the conversation for the sake of the other members of the group. This can be done sensitively and you might say something like, "John, we really appreciate your insights but let's see what others think about the passage."

You might have to talk to a person outside the group. For example, if you have someone who gives other people advice, you could say "Marie, I've notice you like to give people advice and I realize this is because you're trying to be helpful. I've done that too, but I've found that people grow when they figure out what to do on their own. What do you think?"

Sometimes you may have a person with a difficult personality who needs professional help. Talk to your pastor to see if he or she can provide counseling or a recommendation to another counselor.

Evaluating the group

How effective was the group?

In order to determine if your small group is healthy it is wise to do regular evaluations. As a leader you can evaluate the group but you should also ask for input from the participants. Consider asking for feedback after several meetings, rather than waiting toward the end. Some sample questions to include in your evaluation are:



- Did the study measure up to what you expected of it?
- Did the study help you grow in your relationship with others?
- Did the study help you grow in your relationship with God?
- Do you feel all group members were given an equal opportunity to participate in discussions?
- Do you feel the group was the right size?
- Would you like to continue in this study group?
- If you would like to continue, do you have suggestions on what the group should study next?
- Do you have any other suggestions, comments, etc.?

Where Do We Go from Here?

Depending on the results of your evaluation, you may decide to continue your group with a new topic. You may need to make changes after consulting with the group. The time or day of the meeting may need to be changed.

Use the time before you start up again to publicize the study and ask your group members to personally invite potential new members for the group.

Additional resources for study groups

American Bible Society

Includes resources, study guides, and more on Books of the Bible and People of the Bible, and other topics

www.bibleresources.americanbible.org

Bible Briefs

From the Virginia Theological Seminary, a series of short pamphlets introducing the books of Scripture

www.vts.edu/biblebriefs

Bible Gateway

Has numerous translations, audio Bibles, InterVarsity Press' New Testament Commentaries and other commentaries

www.biblegateway.com

Bible Hub

Features topical, Greek and Hebrew study tools, plus concordances, commentaries, dictionaries, sermons and devotionals

www.biblehub.com

Bible Oremus

Free New Revised Standard Version (American and Anglicized versions), and several versions of the Psalms

www.bible.oremus.org

Bible Study Tools

Includes numerous Bible translations as well as commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, and encyclopedias as well as other Bible study tools

www.biblestudytools.com

Biblia

Includes Bible search engine, reading plans, concordance and dictionary, book outlines and more from the Zondervan NIV Study Bible

www.biblica.com/niv/study-bible

Blue Letter Bible

Includes commentaries and other Bible reference tools, as well as devotionals and articles related to Bible study

www.blueletterbible.org

Enter the Bible

Written by Luther Seminary faculty and includes summaries, outlines, background and videos for group study or personal devotions
www.enterthebible.org

E-Sword

Website to download free Bible study software
www.e-sword.net

Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Bible Studies

Free Bible studies to download based on the lectionary
<http://www.elca.org/Resources/Bible-Studies>

Step Bible

Various translations and commentaries with different search options from Tyndale House, Cambridge UK
www.stepbible.org

Study Light

Bible commentaries, encyclopedias, dictionaries, lexicons and original language tools
www.studylight.org

You Version

Offers multiple Bible mobile applications, languages and translations as well as Bible reading
www.youversion.com

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