



*A rethink in student ministry:
reproducing spiritual leaders*

Grant English



An Intro and a Thank You

Do you remember why you first got involved in student ministry?

Maybe you fell into student ministry by accident but the fact that you are still doing it tells me that at some point something clicked and hooked you in forever. What was that something?

Here's my guess – you loved seeing Jesus change the life of a teenager.

A few years ago, I was asked a life-changing question by a fellow youth pastor. How many students leave your ministry and then spend the rest of their life investing in the Kingdom of God? Not just going to church – but Great Commandment/Great Commission kind of investing?

My answer revealed more about my immaturity and shortsightedness than I care to admit. I looked up from my computer, evaluated the kind of ministry I was advancing and made this conclusion: I had completely lost my way. I was spending more time planning events and arranging transportation than actually seeing life change in students. The books on my shelf were more concerned with “how-to” and “right answers” than developing a hunger for God and a craving for the presence of Jesus. Training of volunteers focused more on outcome than on their spiritual health and development. Somehow I had been able to program and calendar the Great Commission and Great Commandment to the point that it was now manageable and convenient. Ironic that Jesus never embraced those two values.

Born out of that moment came this document – a rethink of student ministry. This isn't perfect. It's got holes and is constantly being rewritten. It's organic in a way, constantly being adapted and changed because that is the nature of making a disciple of Jesus. Because of this - none of this material is original. I've begged, borrowed and stolen almost everything in here from every volunteer, student, youth pastor, and friend who was willing to give me face time and dialogue about reproducing spiritual leaders who invest their lives in the Kingdom.

The goal of this book is not to replace all of the great resources we have in student ministry. It is to help create a framework in which to use those resources to the fullest – reproducing spiritual leaders who want to see life change in others.

Hopefully this book will help us all recapture why we started this crazy ride called student ministry in the first place – a Jesus changed life.

God's best to you,
Grant English

Thank you to every volunteer that I've had the honor of serving with. You not only proved this works, but together we are watching God change a generation. Thank you to the reader for taking the time to rethink.

Lifewalking

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How to Use This Book

I want to talk about airplanes for a second. Which wing is your favorite?

The Right Answer: Both. Everyone realizes that you need two wings to fly, so favoring one wing over another is not only ridiculous, it can get you killed.

Let's transfer that to developing a leader. A spiritual leader needs both skill and heart.

The danger of a book is that it tends to favor the skill wing. The reality is without a heart that is growing with (and being changed by) Jesus, the skills are worthless. We best minister out of the overflow of our relationship with Jesus and we grow best in community. This is why we do student ministry the way we do it (Coach-Life Group Leader-Intern). But I'm getting ahead of myself.

At this point, let's just say this book is to provide a foundational set of knowledge, skills, and values for our leaders. It's designed to be the framework that a Coach uses in his journey with Life Group Leaders and Interns. It's designed to help us create a culture where God can change lives.

Let's Life Walk...

Why Are We Here?

The definition of a clueless leader is one who doesn't know where he is going and why he is going there. That is what a mission and vision gives. Fortunately for us, our vision and mission as believers has been given to us already by God.

I call it GC2. It's where the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40) intersect. We are going to love God, love others, and take someone on the journey with us. That's reproducing a spiritual leader.

Why is this our mission?

Well, duh? Jesus told us to. Matthew 28:18-20 is the mandate from Jesus to the church until he returns. Matthew 23:37-40 is how to do it. It's inside-out, life on life, cross-cultural lifewalking.

We are going to unpack this idea of transformation later, suffice it to say now that only people changed by God can do things of God. Very few of us (if any) were argued into the Kingdom of God. Most of us (probably all) were loved into the family of God. Somehow, somehow we encountered Jesus and His love for us.

That's the beauty of GC2. The more you love God; the more He's going to change you so that you can love others better. You would never hold out the best thing that has happened to you from someone you love - Jesus. That's the GC2 cycle working.

I think this is exactly what Jesus was talking about in John 12:32 when He said "When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to me." Jesus was lifted up on a cross - the ultimate expression of His love. When this picture of God's unconditional love is lifted up, HE will draw people to himself.

It's about leading people into a life changing encounter with Jesus.

That's the bullseye of the target. So how are we going to do this? In a Life Group.

Why Life Groups?

I think the best place to have a life changing encounter with Jesus is in community. It's not the only place - I myself love to be alone on a ridge with Jesus looking at the sunset. It's an encounter with Jesus to be sure. And to some extent it is life changing.

But the fleshing out of that change will always happen in community. Always. Community will validate the alone experience. Like I said, community is the BEST place to have a life changing encounter with Jesus.

In fact, I'd be so bold to say that it is impossible for someone to be mature in Christ without community.

So if community is so important, what is it?

It's hard to define - but here's a start. It is belonging and making sure that anyone else can belong. Community is being in each other's stuff. It's lifewalking with someone else. It's knowing someone and BEING known by someone else more than you're comfortable with. And they still love you. Community is trusting someone else with your baggage. Community is the flesh of God's unconditional love to others and it will change your life.

Community happens on a smaller scale. It's about intimacy. All of these things happen in the context of a small group. We call our small groups "Life Groups." We have monster reasons why Life Groups are the best place to encounter and experience the life-changing unconditional love of Jesus.

It is how Jesus did ministry. Out of the hundreds of people who were following Him, Jesus picked out 12. These men would be his Life Group. Out of those 12, he chose 3 to be in His inner circle. He spent 3 years with these men. The Son of God was strategic and purposeful in this decision.

Life change happens in small groups. When we stop and think about the major decisions we have made - both good and bad - who was around us? More than likely, just a handful of people. Our hobbies, foods we eat, to accept Christ, to exercise more - whatever the decision is, it is normally made in the context of a smaller group.

Gives "front-row" care to each person. If we want every person to experience the love of God, how can someone feel loved with just being one of the masses? It is so easy to miss people in a group of 200 or more. It's impossible to forget about someone in a group of 7.

Life Groups are a better arena to apply God's word. Trying to make disciples in a corporate setting is akin to teaching a room full of 7th graders how to build a boat. I don't know if any of them COULD do it nor WOULD I be the test pilot to see if it worked. There are specific circumstances that some people need help in that we are never going to cover from "up front." Life Groups give us that arena.

Great arena for multiplying disciples. Every Life Group has a Life Group leader and an intern. Every Life Group leader has a coach. The goal is for the intern to lead their own Life Group after a year with their own intern. Life groups allow a greater number of disciples to be trained.

Life Groups are not another option for our people. It is our lifeblood. We think life change can't happen without them.

Our Structure

It's not enough to know the reason behind Life groups and the bullseye. We need some structure to get anything out of it. Having blueprints are great, but it is better to have an actual building.

The ideal size of a Life group is between 10 to 15 people. It is very hard for a Leader and Intern to give front-row care to more than 15 people. So the goal is to birth a new Life group when we hit that number.

We have 3 key roles: Coach, Life Group Leader, and Intern. Inside a particular Life Group you might have a host couple or even a social guru. You can be as creative as you want here, but the core leadership consists of these three.

Let's start with the **Intern**. The main responsibility of the Intern is to be a sponge. We want him/her to observe and absorb both the how's and the why's of Life group. An intern will gain an ever-increasing circle of responsibility within the Life Group. This includes discipling new believers, specific care for certain Life Group members, and leading a meeting every now and then. More importantly, we want that Intern to be able to feed themselves spiritually by the end of the year.

The **Life Group leader** shares the responsibility for the health of the Life Group along side an intern. The Life Group Leader's primary purpose is leading the Life Group into transformational encounters with Jesus while taking the intern along on the journey.

The **Coach** is responsible for discipling the Life Group Leader and the intern. Coaches not only will help with the mechanical aspect of leading a Life Group, but they will also push into the "harder" areas. The coach is the first line of help, encouragement, and guidance for the Life Group leader and intern. We will cover this in more detail when we talk about Coaching.

Expectations, Minimum

We want the Intern and LG Leader to meet every other week to not just plan the next meeting but to check on each other's soul. This would be a great arena to evaluate the health of your group and what you would like to see them doing in the future.

The Coach needs to be at one of those meetings per month. Coaches also will only coach a maximum of 2 leaders at a time. He/she will need to be a part of one of those leader's life groups as well as visiting the other one at least once a month.

We have four **Confabs** a year. These are times to refresh our souls as well as celebrate what God is doing through our Life groups.

Purpose Of A Life Group

So let's put together what we know so far. Our mission is the Great Commission and Great Commandment. The manner in which this best happens is out of the overflow of a life changing experience with Jesus. The arena this best happens is in community – we call ours Life Groups. That then is our purpose for Life Groups – to be a place where people can encounter this love of Jesus and be changed by it. Another way of saying it is that we want our Life Groups to be a place of spiritual transformation.

Transformation

The Bible talks a lot about transformation.

Galatians 4:19 talks about "Christ being formed in you."

Romans 12:2 - Do not conformed...but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

2 Corinthians 3:18 - And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness.

Philippians 3:21 - who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The word transformed is metamorphoo in Greek - where we get our word metamorphous. Makes you think of a butterfly, doesn't it? The word means to be changed inward not noticeable to the human eye, like an embryo being formed in a mother's womb.

This is a wonderful word picture of how Christ changes us. It starts inward unnoticeable to the human eye. Eventually it affects every aspect of our life.

The essence of spiritual transformation is living in the presence of God. That is how Christ is formed in us. Sounds a lot like discipleship doesn't it? Because that is exactly what it is!

So what exactly does spiritual transformation look like and how does that happen in a Life Group? Great questions that we will unpack in greater detail later. For now I want us to jump to the end of the story – what is the end result (if any) of spiritual transformation?

Let's all agree that transformation NEVER stops – at least this side of Heaven. I do however think ALL HEALTHY TRANSFORMATION WILL RESULT IN MULTIPLICATION OF ANOTHER LEADER. It has to if it is to be true to the model and calling that we see in Jesus.

The Seeds of Multiplication

When Jesus set out to change the world, he started by changing 12 men. We too are called to change our worlds, so we must start sowing the seeds of multiplication. What I have learned, I will lifewalk through with you. What you learn on our journey together, I expect you to take someone else on next.

That is why it really doesn't matter how big or small our Life Groups are. If a Life Group has only 4 people, but 2 of them go on to lead a Life Group, then that is a successful Life Group. We multiply leaders who are having life changing experiences with Jesus. We don't multiply groups. That is Great Commission work at its core.

Spiritual Transformation, 101

Suppose we have a loving, caring and all the other warm fuzzy words you can imagine Life Group. Tina is a part of this group and she has a few rough edges – gossip, critical spirit, ungrateful, and angry to name a few. Let's suppose that for a year she's a part of this accepting, loving group. In that year, we see no life change plus the group continues to "love" her and make her feel good about herself.

Is this what we want? Is this discipleship? Is this transformational? NO! This enabling situation has all the spirituality of a Hallmark commercial - it is warm. It's fuzzy. It feels good. But it is not bringing her into an encounter with Jesus and therefore we won't see any life change. This pseudo-community is exactly what we must avoid if we are ever to experience true transformational community. But how in the world do we get there?

Transformational Principles

First, all growth - spiritual and otherwise - comes through a disciplined, many times painful process. Think about it. From learning to walk, ride a bike, to trust or not trust a friend, learn a skill, or program your VCR - all these things took discipline, failures, and many times painful failures in order for us to acquire those skills. It is no different spiritually. A Christian will not grow without pain or trials. It is impossible to read the Bible and not see this pattern in scripture. Listen to any Christian leader and it is plain to see that growth is not without pain and struggle.

Secondly, spiritual transformation is intentional. It does not happen by accident or by osmosis. It is the result of an individual intentionally yielding his or her heart to God.

Spiritual transformation, while happening to individuals, best happens in Life groups. The capacity for the mind to hear a sermon, write notes on it, and yet it never create any change is staggering. Doing life in community not only will help expose our blind spots but hopefully give us the motivation, context, and tools to be changed by God.

Finally, being in a Life group does not guarantee spiritual transformation. We'll talk about this next in greater detail but for now let's understand that as leaders our primary responsibility is two-fold. First, we are to be about spiritual transformation ourselves. In other words, we must be people who constantly seek life-changing encounters with Jesus. We can't take people where we are not going.

The second responsibility we have is to help provide an opportunity for others to have a life changing encounter with Jesus. We 'frame' the picture. It's not our responsibility as to how people respond to that opportunity. People must choose for themselves if they are going to engage in that process and allow God to transform them. Just because someone has chosen to show up to a Life Group, it doesn't mean they are willing, ready, or even able to allow God to meet them.

So if spiritual transformation is so important, why is it so hard? Simply because there are some hindrances to spiritual transformation. Here's my short list...

1. **Satan** - 1 Peter 5:8 says it best. He does not want to see anyone changed.
2. Our **culture** - While there are some things in our culture that are good, Ephesians 2 calls the devil the ruler of this earth so it would follow that most of our culture reflects this.
3. Our **Selves** - transformation often means enduring pain or discomfort that could otherwise be avoided. And we like avoiding pain. See Romans 7:15-20.
4. **Lack of faith** - Matthew 17:14-21, do we really think anyone can be changed?

5. **Lack of knowledge** - Acts 18:1-4; 24-26 Sometimes it's hard to understand how transformation works.
6. **Drifting** - This would be unintentional. This is someone who is easily swayed by what is going on around him and just goes with the flow.
7. **Rebellion** - this is intentional. This is someone who knows the truth and chooses to reject it.
8. **Distraction** - Matthew 19:16-24
9. **Fear** - It is scary to trust God.

There are things that help with spiritual transformation. We call those things "disciplines" or "practices." The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us, writes Richard Foster in Celebration of Discipline. The disciplines themselves are not transforming. They are a means to an end. God is and must be the focus of these disciplines.

There are three arenas where spiritual disciplines are practiced. In the Corporate arena we would see singing, teaching, and praying. The Sunday morning, large group worship time is a corporate arena.

Over the next couple of chapters, I want to unpack the other two arenas – community and individual (inner). I think there are some core disciplines that HAVE to happen in order for there to be spiritual transformation and they take place in these two arenas.

Before we do that, I want to cover one more thing.

Framing

There is a danger for us leaders to be so focused on having a life changing encounter with Jesus that we start manipulating our meetings just to 'have one.' There is a temptation to force things to happen in Life Group or create unauthentic experiences just for sake of having an emotional ego trip. Let's be honest – it's been happening in student ministry for years and none of us are immune to it.

Obviously, that's not what we want. And while we want to avoid the above mentioned hindrances, we don't want to be fake about anything. There's a way to peak the spiritual eyes of our folks so that regular, routine things suddenly have deep spiritual meaning without being manipulative about it. I call it "framing."

Every notice that the frame on a piece of art? If you have, then the framer and the artist have really messed up. The point of the frame is to accentuate and draw attention to the art – not the frame. Although the frame is a piece of the whole experience, it exists to focus our attention to the main attraction.

The same principle exists in discipleship. For example, your Life Group always has snacks at the beginning of your meeting. On this particular night the subject is thankfulness. So you set out the chips and salsa but in order to get to the salsa, every person must pick up an index card and a pencil and write out what they are most thankful for. What would happen a few minutes later when you "start" the meeting?

The reality is the “meeting” started the minute someone went to dip their chip in the salsa. Their minds and thoughts are already down the road on the subject. By asking folks to risk just a little bit over the chips and dip, you’ve just framed the evening’s discussion.

A starter question like this is just one example of many to frame the evening. Could be a piece of art, music, movies, anything that asks the participants to view something a bit different and puts their focus towards the main attraction of the evening. It’s setting the table for an encounter with the Holy. It’s an invitation, not a manipulation.

As we begin to unpack the Disciplines, see them in this light – as framers of the evening. Not necessarily the main event, but tools that point to the main event – an encounter with Jesus.

Inner Disciplines

These are the practices (disciplines) that have to happen in the Individual arena in order for us to experience spiritual transformation. They feed our souls. We want practice these individually to the point that we minister out of the overflow of them.

All of that to reinforce what was said earlier – all the skills in the world will not make a difference if a bone-dry soul is trying to use them.

Inner Disciplines

Prayer

Marinate/Meditate

Worship

Silence/Fasting

Serve

Prayer

God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.

- Mother Teresa

Prayer is nothing else than a sense of God's presence.

- Brother Lawrence

Prayer is not an exercise. It is the life of the saint.

- Oswald Chambers

Prayer is so much larger than just the bowing of a head and whispering to God. It is a life-giving, life-changing conversation with God. All conversations have two sides - listening and speaking. No one likes to find themselves on the wrong end of a one-way conversation, you think God is any different? Me neither.

So when we speak of prayer our definition must include listening. If our current prayer life does not have extended periods of listening, how effective can it really be? How life-giving and life-changing can a 'prayer life' be without ever listening to Him?

Paul says to "pray without ceasing" in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, just like we breathe. That might be the best way to think of prayer – spiritual breathing. Our goal is not necessarily to have a great definition of prayer, but rather actually do it. So let's explore some practical ways to do that.

How To Pray, by Jesus

Jesus' teaching on how to pray is nothing short of heretical. It's all counterintuitive! A quick look at Matthew 6:7-13 will further explain what I mean.

1. When you pray...

It's not an "if" statement. It is expected of anybody who wants to know God.

2. Get alone...

It's not for show. He desires an intimate conversation with us.

3. To your daddy...

He's not distant or unapproachable. Climb up in His lap, enjoy the audience.

4. Don't use big words...

You be you, let God be God. Speak plain and simple. You can't impress Him.

5. Let Him reorient your world...

Check out the basic layout of his model prayer.

You are holy, I'm not.

You are the king, I'm not.

You take care of my needs, nobody else – including me.

You forgive and restore me in the same manner I do others

You keep leading, not me.

It Can't Be That Simple...can it?

It is that simple. That's what's so heretical about it. Simple is not the same thing as easy, though. I'm probably the least qualified to write on this subject. I am Captain Distraction when it comes to prayer. So just for the sake of vulnerability, I want to share some ideas and tools that have helped me.

Write 'em down

Writing prayers down slows me down – which is a good thing. My mind can get going 500 mph and that is when the distractions and rabbit trails start coming in. So journaling helps with this. Journaling also gives me the privilege of seeing (in my own handwriting!) God working in me and my world. Sometimes it is in the form of Him directly intervening, more often it is in the form of Him patiently working on my heart and I can see that change in how my prayers change over an extended period of time.

Read other people's prayers

There are going to be dry times. We don't have to waddle through them alone. Take comfort and insight from others who have been down that road. The Common Book of Prayer is one of many possible resources. Personal journals and devotion books are another great resource.

Pray through Scripture

Take a Psalm or passage you are wrestling with and just pray through it with the Father.

Have a distraction pad

Ever notice how crystal clear a "get done list" gets once you get quiet enough to hear God? I now have a distraction column in my journal. Just write down the distraction, get to it later.

Have a sanctuary and an appointment

My sanctuary is a coffee shop downtown. We (the Father and I) meet there every Monday morning for an hour or two. Most weeks I get another day in as well, but I always get Monday. Your schedule might not have that kind of flexibility, but find and make the time. For me, it's better to find one extended time with Him to do nothing but listen and converse with Him.

Mix it up

Read, draw, write, talk out loud, get in a park, get quiet in a library, or put on some headphones and sing as loud as you can to Him. Spend some creative energy with your time of listening and engaging Him.

Get quiet...regularly

I turn off my radio a lot now. I just shut it off and drive in the quiet, listening to Him. If I drive to an appointment and forget to shut it off, I shut it off on the way back. My goal is to spend as much time in quiet as I do in noise.

These are just starting points from a fellow sojourner. What are yours?

Marinate/Meditate

If prayer is breathing, then meditating on God's word is eating. Meditating on God's Word is very different than the "New Age/Eastern Thinking" mindset. The goal of most New Age/Eastern Thinking is to EMPTY your mind so that enlightenment can come. When we meditate on God's word, we want to FILL our minds.

That's why I love using the word marinate. Let it soak - just like a steak (sorry, vegetarians, it's an illustration...just go with it). When we sit a steak in marinade, eventually the steak assumes the flavor of that marinade. The longer it soaks, the more it tastes like it. This is the same effect the Word of God has on us.

How To Marinate...the Beginner's Guide

If you already have a system in place, use it. This is just to get us started.

1. Start big, not small

I would start with chapters, not verses. Why? I want stories and big picture ideas that I can chew on. I want to know the whole arch of the story I'm dealing with. If I have the story in my head, I can muse and ponder the details during the day. If I'm unsure, I do a quick re-read of the story to make sure I have my facts straight.

I'll stay in the same spot for a week or more, reading it over and over again. Does it get boring? Maybe... that's why I also use a distraction pad/journal!

2. Have a distraction pad.

Just like the one we had one in prayer! Any question that pops in my head (whether it seems germane to the topic or not) I write down. I'll refer back to it throughout the week. If I move on to another passage, I still have my notes & thoughts jotted down. When I come back, I don't have to start all over again. I also try to answer these questions for every passage I read:

What word or phrase "shimmered" or stuck out.

What did you like best about the passage?

What did you like least?

What did you learn about God?

What did you not understand or find puzzling?

If you were to choose a sentence or phrase to meditate on this week, which would it be? And why?

3. Work in, not out.

Try not to start your time in the Word with figuring out how it applies to your life. The Spirit will eventually work that out. Instead, figure out how it worked IN the context of what your reading. Why is it in this location? What are the major themes and issues being dealt with? What culturally is going on?

Some things in scripture are for description, others are for prescription. Free yourself from having to find a prescription in every single thing you read in Scripture.

4. Read more, not less.

Scripture memory is important. But I also want to know the larger context of that verse I am quoting. Quoting it and applying it in a way that it was never meant to be applied is just as dangerous as not knowing it at all.

That is why I read more, not less. If the story or issue is covered in other areas of scripture, I read it in those settings. I'll read the passage in multiple versions of the Bible. In order to marinate, I want more information floating around, not less.

5. Don't go alone

Take someone else on the journey with you. Invite a Life Group leader, intern, or friend to marinate on the same passage and share your questions and insights. They will have different takes on the passage. God could use you to speak to them and vice versa. We are less likely to miss stuff if we take someone else with us.

Basic Hermeneutics

The word hermeneutics has its root from the Greek god Hermes, the messenger god. He conveyed meaning or information. Hermeneutics is basically interpreting the Bible with an aim to applying it to today's world.

The **first task** is to discover what the text meant in its original setting. We call this exegesis, which means 'to lead out of.' We are going to try to allow the Bible to speak for itself as opposed to eisegesis.

Eisegesis is 'to read into' a text. This is coming to the Bible looking for it to support a meaning that we want.

The second task is to discover what the text means in a contemporary setting. This is the "So What" of Bible study.

Barriers to Good Hermeneutics

Language

The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Fortunately, there are some very good translations so this is not a significant barrier for our purposes.

Historical Distance

Most of the New Testament was written in between the years 39 AD to 90 AD. The Old Testament was written over a period of 2,000 years before that with over 50 different authors. That is a significant amount of time. Plus, the further away we move from an event, the harder it is to get a clear picture of what really happened.

Cultural Distance

We live in a western, democratic and individualistic culture. The eastern culture was (and is) highly communal and community living. The rights of the many are more important than the rights of the one in that culture. This communal setting is the context of the Bible.

Presuppositions

It is impossible to come to the Bible neutral. We bring our heritage and background into the mix. We bring our predispositions, pre-understandings, or biases. It's incredibly difficult to come to the Word unbiased.

A classic example of this was during the Civil War. Many folks in the South used Scripture to support the practice of slavery. Many others used the same Scriptures to fight against it.

Personality

Our temperament, educational background, and personality effects how we interpret the Bible. A Type A person is going to read the Bible differently than a Type B.

Two people can study the life of David completely different. One might camp in the Psalms focusing on the cave times of David. The other might run to the battle scenes and the crumbling of his empire.

While these barriers can be significant, there are some things we can do to limit their effects and, in fact, become strong interpreters of the World of God.

Being a Strong Interpreter

Being a strong interpreter requires two things: the Holy Spirit and a mind. Believers have a stronger position to understand Bible because of the Holy Spirit inside them. This of course does not mean that every believer is a strong interpreter. There are some other factors.

Some one **who seeks after the deep things of God** makes a strong interpreter. One who is **open and dependant** on the Holy Spirit is normally a stronger interpreter. **Methodically and systematically** studying the scripture lends itself to a stronger interpretation.

Concerns/Hindrances For Strong Interpretation

Lexicography

This is etymology (word origin) and context. Context is the biggest clue as to what a word means. Not just in the immediate verse, but in the chapter and book as well. Different authors may have slightly different meanings for the same words due to the context in which they write in. Lexicons and theological dictionaries help in this area.

Grammar

Is the word a verb, participle, adverb, or noun? Is the statement a command or a question? Remember sophomore English class? This is what we're talking about except with Greek and Hebrew.

Most of us don't know Greek and Hebrew. Most of us don't WANT to know Greek and Hebrew. Which is cool. You can be a strong interpreter without knowing a stitch of Greek or Hebrew. What will help is reading your text in multiple versions.

Literary genre

There are all kinds of different types of literature in the Bible. Prose, poetry, figurative language, literal language, narrative history, prophecy, and gospel are just a few. Each one should be handled differently. For example, we don't handle John 4 the same way we handle Job 4. One book that is indispensable in this area is *How To Read The Bible For All It Is Worth* by Fee and Stuart.

Historical/Cultural Concerns

Paul's letters are extremely sensitive to historical/cultural context, whereas Proverbs are not as tied to its context. Look at 1 Corinthians 11:5-7. What could this mean? Does this mean every woman who has short hair is living in sin? The Greek god Aphrodite had temples in the city. The temple priests were no more than prostitutes and they had short hair so it would be known who they were. So Paul's command was basically don't act or conform to this world.

Political setting, social setting, economic background, and religious background are the major important historical concerns. Books on manners and customs of biblical times and history books are very helpful in this area. Some of the newer Study Bibles come with some of this information in their introduction to the books.

Contextual Concerns

Just because someone quotes the Bible, doesn't mean it is biblical. Look at Ephesians 6:5. Paul tells slaves to obey their masters. So this means that the Bible supports slavery, right? Not exactly. Once we begin to look at the chapter as a whole, we see something else. It appears that Paul is giving specific instructions to folks in specific circumstances. It appears that he is "fleshing out" what he told them to do in Ephesians 5:21 to submit to one another. This is what we mean by context.

What is the message of those verses immediately surrounding the verses we are studying? This is called the immediate context. There are two other major contexts to consider: the book and the Bible. How does the text fit into the book that it is located in? How does the book fit into the Bible? Not all books have the same theological weight. We treat the book of Leviticus quite differently than we do Romans.

All of this talk about interpretation could leave us feeling like understanding the Bible is a daunting task. While that might be true, it is equally true that it is doable. The Bible in its essence is a letter written to children from a loving Father who doesn't want them to miss eternity.

On top of that there are some guidelines to help us. Most of this came from the book *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

Essential message of the Bible is clear.

Here's an assignment for you - can you put the meaning/story of the Bible in one, short sentence? Try it. How will this help? It will help when you run across a difficult to understand passage - you can run back to the "basic" story and ask how does it fit?

What do we do with ones that don't fit? Try to understand them in light of what is clear. No doctrine should be built solely on obscure passages. Doctrines are more secure as they are taught in multiple parts of the Bible. Passages that are brief should be studied in light of passages in greater length & depth. Certain biblical paradoxes are just going to have to be lived with. Such as the Incarnation and the sovereignty of God versus the freedom of man.

Scripture best interprets Scripture.

The Bible was not put together by accident. It has a unity to it. Although many different authors wrote it over an incredible amount of time, it is coherent and it "speaks with itself."

God's revelation of Himself was progressive.

God chose to make Himself known in stages. He did not reveal His plan all at once. Jesus Christ was the final revelation of Himself, therefore when interpreting scripture; the New Testament takes priority. This does NOT mean that the Old Testament is unimportant. It does mean that we read Old Testament in light of what we know in the New Testament.

Keep aware of the possible cultural conditions of Scripture.

Some passages may contain advice or commands intended only for an ancient historical setting. This may just be the most difficult task we have. Some of scripture is DESCRIPTIVE and some of it is PRESCRIPTIVE. How are we to discern which is which? How do we know that some things are in there because that's what happened but it was never the author's intent for us to follow that example?

I refer back to How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth.

Recognize behind cultural conditioned counsel lies eternally valid principles. (1 Pet 3:3)

Remember central core of biblical teaching is never culturally conditioned.

Determine whether the matter is inherently moral or non-moral. Morality is not subject of cultural issues; it is for all people for all times.

Note whether the Bible has a uniform witness to the subject or whether there are differences in how the matter is handled. (1 Tim 2:11-12 & 1 Cor. 11:5) If tension exists there maybe a cultural issue at stake.

Note possible differences between 1st & 2nd centuries and our culture today.

If the issue is not dealing or affecting the essential biblical message, then exercise some Christian charity.

All Those Versions

Most people are going to bring a New International Version to Life group. It's the most popular version of the Bible in the world. BUT it's going to be wise to be familiar with a couple of other versions as well as well why we have all these versions.

There are two major ways translations differ. The first way is the underlying text that is used for translation. For example, the NIV Bible uses Greek and Hebrew manuscripts but the old Good News Bible used an English translation to base its paraphrase on. The Today's English Version now uses a Greek and Hebrew manuscripts as their basis. If the translation is of another translation, it will be weaker than one that uses Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. (See Hosea 4:7 as an example)

The second way translations differ is the theory of the translator. If you want to go nuts with this stuff, check out www.bible-researcher.com/translation-methods. Otherwise, this is the quick version. Notice our "line of translators." On one end we have Word Correspondence Theory, the other Paraphrase.

Line of Translators

Word Correspondence_____Dynamic
Equivalent_____Paraphrase

The **Word Correspondence Theory's** goal is to maintain as close as possible to the grammatical relationship with the original language. These translations are closer to a word for word translation. They prefer literalness to readability. These are very strong translations but the danger is that Greek doesn't always translate well word for word. The New American Standard and American Standard Version are examples of this theory.

At the opposite end of this line is a **paraphrase**. A paraphrase is concerned with meaning. It will use words that the original author would not use. There is a danger of writing theology into a paraphrase, especially if it clarifies the **meaning**. The Preface of the Living Bible gives an excellent definition of paraphrases. The Real English Bible and the Good News Bible are examples.

Somewhere in between these two is what is called Dynamic Equivalent. With DE, meaning is priority but grammar, syntax, and style play a part in how the words are translated. Primary focus here is readability. The New International Version is an example of the Dynamic Equivalent.

Most translations use committees to translate. The larger the committee, the better the translation. This is one reason why the NIV is as popular as it is. With larger committees, there are fewer opportunities to translate with a particular denomination's viewpoint.

What translation should I use?

That's part personal preference, part figuring out how you are using it. Are you going to use it for preaching, teaching, devotional, deep study, or story telling? I love The Message translation by Eugene Peterson. I use it for devotions or when I am trying to feel the punch of a verse.

For deep Bible study or sermon preparation, I'll use the English Standard Version, the NIV and NAS.

It is only going to help you to look at other translations. I'd encourage you to use them in your Life Group emphasize a point or bring out the emotion in a passage.

Further Resources:

The English Bible from the KJV to the NIV by Jack P. Lewis

So Many Versions-20th Century Versions of the Bible by Kubo & Specht

Worship

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name.

Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness.

Psalm 29:2

That this is a core discipline probably isn't that big of a surprise. John Piper in Let The Nations Be Glad says that the reason we do missions is because there are places on the earth that do not worship Jesus. And it is out of our overflow of worship to Jesus that we want to share His glory with others.

Worship answers both the why of the mission and the how to accomplish it. We've said all along that we best minister out of the overflow of our relationship with Jesus and worship is both the point and the fuel of that ministry. It's what we will do for eternity.

What is surprising is how few of us do it.

I don't mean singing. Hopefully, by now, we've developed (or are developing) a Romans 12:1-2 understanding of worship. What ever you do can be worship. Where is your mind in that task? For what audience are you 'performing' for?

Writing, drawing, building, listening, serving, and waiting can all be worship. There is no way we are going to uncover all of the mysteries and possibilities of worship here. On one hand, it is easy to see how all of the disciplines – both inner and Life Group – could be worship. It is also very easy to see them as 'duties' to be accomplished – which isn't ascribing to the Lord what He is worth.

What are other ways you've found to ascribe worth to God?

Silence and Fasting

There are times we need to withdraw in order to drink deeper of God's presence. That is the purpose of both fasting and silence. That is also the reason we are going to deal with them together. It's not just some physical exercise that glorifies God or speaks of our maturity. It's creating space in our crowded world for more of God.

In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus speaks pretty frankly about the issue of fasting in the same context he speaks on prayer. All of the principles about prayer apply here.

Before we unpack some helpful hints, let's be sure we get the point. We fast or get silent to create space for an encounter with Jesus. Trading one distraction for another isn't exactly the point.

Allow me to explain. One of the funniest exchanges I've ever had was with a student who was fasting from video games because it was consuming his life. While that may not be the greatest motivation in the world to 'fast', it's a start. And I would argue that it's better to at least start and figure some things out on the fly than to wait until you've got it all figured out.

The student finds himself turning on his Xbox after school one day. In a moment of complete spiritual insight and discipline, he stops himself because he is 'fasting' and instead watches a movie. Not exactly what we are after.

Some helpful hints for this discipline:

1. Don't do it alone. It's important to have some consistent times of silence and fasting in your life. So if getting started is a colossal undertaking for you, enlist a friend to try it with you.
2. Start small but purposeful. Turn off the radio in your car and spend some drive time praying and listening. Skip a meal and meet Jesus for lunch one day a week.
3. Take notes during these times. Some of the stuff will be distractions, but some of it might be nuggets of insight.
4. Practice makes perfect, so if you 'fail' (whatever that means) keep practicing.

Concerning fasting – if you are pregnant, have diabetes, or some other health issue, then broaden your scope of fasting to include electronics, blogging, email, books, or kids...just kidding on the kids thing.

Keep remembering that the purpose of withdrawing from sound or food or electronics is to have an encounter with God.

Serve

Read Ephesians 4:11-13. Anything strike you?

The only way to achieve maturity – the whole measure of fullness of Christ – is to serve out of the giftedness that the Spirit has placed in you. Let that sink in for a moment. It isn't about how much you know but how much you serve. Jesus said it this way in Mark 4:24-25 – “Whatever measure you use, it will be measured to you.” The

more you use your gift – the better you will get at it. However much you invest, that much will be given back to you.

This is why we have this as a core inner discipline. It could be grouped with the Life Group Disciplines as well, but no matter where it is pigeon-holed, its importance can not be debated. God wants us to experience maturity in Him – that is to experience the fullness (whole measure) of Him. And the ONLY way to do that is to serve. It's inseparable from Christian maturity.

The lack of this discipline from our life will turn us into Pharisees – “leaders” who don't serve but have opinions. That is the classic definition of a religious person. Religious people have lots of opinions and ‘insights’ but incarnate very little of what they are teaching.

God's best classroom of transformation is wherever we serve. There are things that God can only teach and form in us within the context of serving.

By serving we ‘join the team’ as opposed to being a critic or observing. So the next time you hear the phrase – “I'm not mature enough to serve” you can just agree with them and tell them they will never be mature enough UNTIL they serve.

Helpful Hints:

1. Not sure what your gift is? Start trying stuff on. Volunteer for a month in a ministry and see if it's a fit.
2. Serve with somebody to begin with.
3. Think outside the church walls. Help with the Compassion Center, tutoring, or another ministry that may not be inside the church.

Life Group Disciplines

These are the disciplines that must happen in community for spiritual transformation to take place. These mark the difference between a Life Group and just a group of people who meet together. These disciplines are the grid as to whether or not we are hitting the bullseye of having life changing encounters with Jesus.

Life Group Disciplines

- Confession

- Appropriate Confession

- Vulnerability Levels & Hindrances

- Application

- Accountability, Audio

- Guidance

- Encouragement

Confession

Mark 5:22-25

Most of us have a mask that we wear. The mask, we think, keeps us safe. It keeps us from being hurt. But by the same token it keeps us from being vulnerable so we don't heal either. Confession requires risk. The ultimate question that we most fear the answer to is this: Will you love me if I show you who I really am?

This is what confession is:

An appropriate disclosure of my failures, temptations, struggles, victories, and thoughts for the purpose of healing or celebration.

This is what it isn't:

a laundry list of sins that you have no intention of doing anything about.

Confession is not your brag list of disobedience or "failures" that you really don't think are failures. It isn't veiled gossip time - where we confess what we did wrong but the real reason we did it was "because Stanley did this first." Confession is about being real - being vulnerable about the real issues.

Let's unpack a crucial word in our definition - purpose.

We want our Life Groups to be places where we can take off our masks. Sex? Politics? Religion? Parents? Drugs? Skipping school - pros and cons? I can't think of a topic that is off limits in a Life Group - with this little disclaimer on it: is it appropriate?

Appropriate Confession

So what does appropriate mean? Here are a couple of guardrail questions to wrestle with.

Does the issue involve someone else or is it just "my stuff?" If it involves someone else, have I attempted to work through the issues with them first? If I haven't - probably isn't appropriate. Part of maturing is learning how to handle conflict biblically, restoratively.

Why is this being shared at this time in this place? Is it for attention? Shock value? Is it a slick way to gossip about someone else? That's not true confession. Is it a cry for help? Is to celebrate what God is doing? Is there an openness to hear what others might have to say about the issue? Then we are on the right road.

Not sure? Ask. There's nothing wrong with asking the person - what are looking for with this information? What do you need?

For adults who work with students - it gets a little cloudier. The above questions are a great starting place but there are few more things we should chew on before we pull the trigger on being vulnerable.

First, if the issue is a past event - **have you really dealt with it or is it still in process?** Don't portray a situation as a victory if you are still in process.

Is it an issue that students deal with or can relate to? If you have a nagging wife, they aren't going to get it. If you are having problems with your rebellious kids – they aren't going to get that either. Save that discussion for your peers.

Do the students you are leading have the skills and maturity to help you with your situation? Do they have the relational, emotional, mental maturity to help you or hold you accountable? If they don't have the capacity to help, it isn't appropriate to share.

Second, **don't share a condemnation.** If you think that no teenager should watch R rated movies or listen to certain kinds of music and you think every parent should have the same standards – keep it to yourself.

There are a lot of reasons for this. First of all, some of those issues aren't as clear to other parents. We are all growing in our walk with Jesus and you may come to a place where you change your mind. Secondly, sharing that kind of concern with a student is pointless. They have no control or input in that arena. If you feel that strongly about it – take it up with the parents, not the students. Finally, as an adult who has chosen to serve students it isn't about us or what we think. We want them to engage with Jesus and let Him start telling them what to do and how to do it. If you find yourself constantly struggling in this area, maybe you are talking too much in the first place.

I feel like a parrot but the bottom line question is "Why am I sharing this?" Don't settle for the first answer that pops in your head. Really dig deep.

Generally speaking - it's completely appropriate to share with students your failings and the lessons learned. Let's just be careful that the focus of the sharing doesn't turn into "look what I did and got away with" or "look how spiritual I am now." If you still aren't sure whether something is appropriate or not - bounce it off of another coach and let them help you decide.

Vulnerability Levels & Hindrances

Not everyone shows up and starts vomiting their issues. We will start with low risk, then move to medium risk, and then high risk. Low risk items are the weather, sports, clothes, or music. Medium risk is when I risk disagreeing with someone.

High risk is when I share something that you could hurt me with if you choose to. Temptations, failures, feelings, and struggles are high risk. High risk is going to be different for different levels of maturity. High risk for a junior high student is revealing who they have a crush on, their fear of sitting alone at lunch, getting acne, or body odor. As we grow up, our high-risk confessions change. (Hopefully.)

If our Life groups never move into high-risk confession, they will stagnate. Individually, we will stagnate in Christ if we never engage in high-risk confession.

High-risk confession is accomplished over time and when the group proves itself trustworthy. High-risk confession may never be on the Life Group agenda. It may occur between certain individuals within the Life Group or there may be a holy moment that brings a high-risk opportunity into play. The reaction of leaders will determine whether or not your group will get there and stay there.

Leaders hinder high risk in one of two ways.

If we keep our masks on, the group members will keep their mask on. If we choose to NOT risk - neither will anyone else in the group.

Secondly, our reaction to someone else's high risk confession. We will either lead them to further healing OR further guilt, fakeness, and shame. What kind of reactions are we talking about?

Inappropriate use of humor. When things get uncomfortable or too vulnerable, we'll crack a joke. Humor can be an anesthetic. There is a place for humor but it can also be inappropriate.

Quick advise. Nothing shuts up someone quite like someone else rattling off what they should have done. This screams "You idiot, that is so simple. I can't believe you are struggling with this."

Broken confidences. Want to destroy a Life Group? Let this happen, then act like it didn't. If folks can't trust whom they are talking to, they will quit talking and showing up.

Trite unauthentic responses. These are responses like "Well, God is in control." "It will be okay when you get some rest." "I am praying for you."

Judgmental statements. "I have no idea how you feel." "How can you say that?" "Don't say that!"

Any one of these will blow up a Life Group. People are only going to be real in a place that they think is both safe and they are loved.

Application

It is not merely enough to study and know God's word. It must be applied to real life. That is the definition of application - *putting the Word of God on our real-life situations*. Immediately we are faced with two problems.

The first problem can be illustrated with the wonderful WWJD cliché. "What Would Jesus Do?" Sometimes this can be helpful, but too often we answer it so abstractly that it is toothless. "Jesus would be loving, kind, patient, and meek." Great. What does love look like in an abusive relationship? How would Jesus 'love' the person who has a

string of lies and half-truths behind him, ruined a friendship, destroyed a Life Group, and is wrecking a marriage? We need more than that.

The second problem is that we are extremely good at manipulating and rationalizing. Ever notice how we tell stories about ourselves? We are either the victim or the hero. That makes applying God's word a little difficult. It is practically impossible to be objective with ourselves.

So what is the solution? Each other. When we surround ourselves with people who love us but aren't impressed with us – they can see through the fog and insecurities. When we allow them access, they can be tools of God in helping us applying God's word. They bring perspective to our worlds.

Accountability

Debunking the Myths

Sitting across from someone asking a list of sin management questions, then finally asking if they have lied to you is a poor imitation of accountability. Real accountability is getting 'on the scale' to see if the application is working. Ideally, what lifewalking means is that we are 'in each other's stuff' enough to see what is working, what isn't working, and what needs to be worked on.

True accountability attempts to answer the question "Is what I am doing facilitating spiritual transformation?" To put it another way, 'Am I allowing the Spirit to transform me in my habits, actions, and thoughts. '

Choose You This Day

How in the world do you measure that without becoming an incredible legalist? The other extreme – being so loving and caring that we've now created an enabling situation – isn't a great option either. While it is true that others can see more objectively what is working and what isn't in our lives than we can, it is equally true that we have become masters of disguise and great public image directors. So how do we exercise this discipline?

1. Choose to BE ACCOUNTABLE. Get real and authentic with your own stuff. Yes, it is risky and yes, you will be misunderstood. Yes, you can and probably will get hurt. But there is NO accountability without this.
2. Choose to engage. If you see a glimpse of something that isn't quite 'right' or genuine – love them enough to engage in their world. Catch the wording of this – engage their world. Find out what is going on before blindly speaking advice. Lifewalk with them. Earn the right to speak truth.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us have a leaning. We either lean toward loving and caring but find it excruciatingly painful to speak truthfully about stuff we see in someone's life, OR we lean toward speaking truth to people that we know nothing about their context or situation. We'll be quick to give advice, but sit in a waiting room for an hour just listening is a waste of time in our minds.

They are both needed. Remember our airplane talk and which wing is more important? It's imperative for us to speak the truth, but it is equally imperative that we do that in love. The best way to communicate love is still time so choose to lifewalk with people AND speak the truth.

3. Choose to be teachable, not broken. If you have to have it all together and perfect, guess what gift God is going to bring to your world? Brokenness. He will wreck something in your world that you can't fix if only for the reason to break your will. So be teachable, no matter what side of the conversation you find yourself on.

4. Choose *grace* over book-keeping. Since we are all messes, let's choose grace over keeping the books. Let's choose to celebrate wins and to learn from our losses as opposed to grieving over them and allowing them to keep us in chains. Sin and screw-ups have their own consequences to deal with without adding a layer of guilt to them.

Final Not-So-Random Thought

We must focus on BEING accountable, not keeping others that way. That's the key in seeing if God's word is working in our life. We must CHOOSE to be accountable.

The focus can never be on KEEPING someone else accountable. We don't see that in scripture. We see people broken, being real with their junk in community and the Spirit somehow, some way working through that to the point of healing. Besides that – it just doesn't work. It's impossible to KEEP someone else accountable. We will only KEEP someone accountable to the level that they WANT us to keep them accountable. That is why it's possible to meet every week for breakfast at IHOP for accountability and still be shocked to read in the paper that one of the guys has a lover and is leaving his family.

Guidance

Guidance is when we help others learn to listen to God. It's not just 'good advice' or wise counsel. It is about helping people discern what God is telling them to do.

The Quaker tradition has what is called Clearness Committees. The committee's job is to ask questions, lots of them. At the end of their time, they restate what they've heard the person say. By asking all those questions, it often removes much of the fog.

For true guidance to take place, I think we need one more piece of the puzzle. After all the questions, are we going to be vulnerable enough to say what we think God wants to happen? Is there a high enough level of trust to be completely honest – everyone around the table, not just the one making the decision?

John Ortberg tells this story as an example. A famous writer and educator was offered the presidency of a college. He came to his Life Group and asked them to be his Clearness Committee. The questions were easy at first - what would you do, where would you live, what are your goals.

Then someone asked what do you think you would like about being president. He said, "I wouldn't like wearing a suit and tie, structured office hours, the politics, and fundraising."

They came back, "Okay; we know what you wouldn't like. Tell us what you would like."

"Yes, I know. I am getting to that. I wouldn't like that it would take me away from my writing, the travel, attending lots of meetings, and the pressure."

"Okay, but what would you like."

He was silent for a long time and finally answered in a meek whisper, "I would like having my picture in the paper with 'President' underneath it."

Nobody said a word. The answer was clear now. Finally someone asked, "Isn't there an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

They laughed but the decision was made - he was not going to become the president.

Encouragement

How careful are we in HOW we speak to each other? I notice that my conversations are peppered with zingers and one-liners. True, most of them are said in jest, just trying to have some fun and laughs...but they can leave a sting.

Why Is Encouragement A Discipline?

Encouragement is *an affirmation of God working inside someone else*. Sometimes this is going to be cheerleading. Sometimes this is going to be a 'kick in the pants.'

This was a key tool of Jesus. He spent most of his time after the resurrection with the folks who hurt him the most by their betrayal. It was expected that the religious leaders would throw Jesus to the wolves. Those folks who followed Jesus around but never fully accepted his message were not expected to stand by him either.

But his disciples – that's another story. They ALL had promised Jesus that they would never betray him. They ALL claimed they could be counted on to the bitter end. Yet, every one of them ran. Not one kept their promise.

When stories surfaced about Jesus rising from the dead, Thomas couldn't bring himself to believe it. Can you blame him? Do you think the disciples really wanted to see Jesus after their failures in Gethsemane? Do you think they had just a hint of nervous anxiety as well as excitement about seeing him? I'm guessing they had mixed feelings about it at first. That is why Jesus sought after them.

Jesus knows that the tasks that lay ahead of these men were like no other in history. They needed to be affirmed and encouraged. So when Jesus walks through the door (literally) to show Thomas his scars, he doesn't lecture him. He says peace to you and blessed are those who don't see and still believe. He gives Peter another 3

chances. He seeks out confused believers on their way home to Emmaus to clarify some things. He seals the deal with words of encouragement.

Encouragement refills the tank, blows the wind back in our sails, and puts steel in our bones to continue on the journey of faith. It is an affirmation of God working in them.

Why Is This So Hard?

Part of the reason is that most of us grew up in homes where encouraging words were sparse. A few of us might have been lucky enough to have someone - a pastor, coach, teacher - to model it for us. As a result, we don't have that as a part of our history.

Another reason why this is difficult is because it takes some degree of spiritual maturity to see God at work in someone else's life. When we see someone risk or reach out, do we see a transformational fruit OR do we communicate an "it's about time" attitude? It's easier to have the 'attitude' than it is to see the fruit. Especially when there is a lot of failure to deal with.

Speaking of failure, it is in these times when God does His best work. It's our job to affirm that work.

Leading A Meeting

There is a difference between leading a meeting and leading a group. Of the two - leading your group is more important. BUT, it is going to be hard to lead your group if you don't have some skill in leading a meeting.

Hopefully these sessions will help.

Leading A Meeting

- Leading A Discussion

- Inductive Bible Study

- Questions and Skills

- Telling Your Story

- Working with Different Personalities

Leading A Discussion

All that has been given up to this point will make us better interpreters and better conduits of the Spirit. The disciplines will give us enough "fuel in the tank" to have the ability to minister out of the overflow. That, however, does not always mean will be better communicators of those experiences. So how do we take WHAT we have learned and communicate it in an effective way?

The basic guideline I'd give you is this - learn to lead by asking questions, not giving directions. I challenge you to try to lead only using questions. With that in place, here are some basic "rules" of planning a discussion.

Start with the END in mind. What questions or crossroads do you want to be at the end of the night? Work backwards from there.

Don't use 10 words when 4 will do. Along the same line, don't illustrate the illustration.

Don't answer most questions. We want people to engage the living God, so don't rush in to answer every question.

Give the Spirit some space to interact with the rest of the group.

Ask more questions than you think you will ever use.

Be visual.

ALWAYS use the back door first. Take your crew on a journey. Don't start the lesson off by saying "Tonight, I am going to tell you the 35 reasons why you should believe this!" Give some room and time for them to come to that conclusion on their own.

Inductive Bible Study

I need to put a HUGE warning sign over this next section. While I believe it is important that we as leaders know how to lead a Bible Study and communicate it creatively and effectively, I just as strongly believe that if we led a Bible Study every single week in our Life Groups we would kill all hope for any spiritual transformation.

How can I say such a thing? Because we want to encounter Jesus. We want folks to grow to a point that they can get spiritual truth first hand, not always rely on a teacher or leader. We want to see and celebrate life change stories. *More knowledge of the scriptures is NOT the bullseye.* But it is a key tool in hitting the bullseye. So with that warning in mind, let's learn how to take what we've learned while marinating on God's word and put it in a "Life Group Friendly" format.

There will be times you will have to 'frame' your discussion and this will help you do that. By asking more questions and being more visual in our presentation, we will lessen the chance of "preaching" to our Life Group.

There are four parts to leading an inductive Bible study.

1. Hook (The Interest Catcher)

Communicating God's Word should never be boring. Video clips, music, object lessons, stories, art work, props, skits, thought questions, and games can all be used. It needs to capture the audience and lead them to the topic or a main point of the study.

In short, it needs to have AIM. It needs to APPLY to the lesson, it needs to be INTERESTING, and it needs to be MEMORABLE. The hook will be the first thing you lead with - but will more than likely be the last thing you work on. Jesus had some great hooks: Mark 9:33-37; Luke 12:13-21; 14:3-4;

2. Observation (Book)

What does the passage say? We want to know what the author's original intent when he wrote the passage. This is where all the hermeneutical concerns and tools come into play. Much of what we need can be found by just reading the context around our passage and asking the right questions.

Key Questions: "The 5 W's and an H"

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

3. Interpretation (Look)

What does this passage mean? The goal is to find the larger Biblical principles.

Key Questions:

What was the intended message for the original audience?

What did God want them to do in the situation?

Does God handle a similar issue elsewhere in the Bible?

How was it handled? How does this passage fit in the book?

Are there parallel passages?

What is the larger message that is being spoken?

4. Application (Took)

How does the meaning of this passage fit in my world? Application is putting God's word on real-life situations. It is where the rubber meets the road. Allow space for folks to wrestle with it.

Key Questions:

How is this relevant to my culture and life today?

What does this truth mean for me?

How should I adjust my lifestyle?
What does God want me to change?
How can I get started?

Questions & Skills

Asking good questions is going to be key for leading a great Bible study AND other discussion as well. It is not possible to ask too many questions.

Opening Questions.

These break the ice or introduce a subject matter. These questions are normally low to medium risk. These are supposed to be "safe" questions. The purpose of these questions is to build community and to warm up. They don't have to always be safe but they should all be provocative enough to start up conversation.

Examples:

If money were no object what vehicle would you drive?
You have a 5-night coupon to eat anyplace you want, which 5 restaurants would you eat at?
If you could attend any one non-biblical historical event what would it be?
If you could be doing anything else right now, what would it be?

Thought Questions

These will be key in maintaining discussions. The goal is to get feedback and probe deeper into the topic. These questions can never be answered with a simple yes or no. Thought questions can also introduce new material. They can present 'devil's advocate' positions or may not even be answerable.

Examples:

What are the possible consequences for the disobedience of Moses?
What does Nicodemus being a Pharisee tell us about Nicodemus?
What are the possible explanations of the empty tomb?
How can we minister to the poor? What will that cost us? Is it worth it? Why?
What character issues do you think God would want to change in you immediately if He had His way with you?

Clarifying Questions

These allow us to summarize what has been said. They will also help communicate the essence of what someone is saying on both the thinking and feeling level.

Examples:

Are you saying that this parable only applied to the disciples?
So you think that's okay for us to have tattoos?
Did I hear you correctly when you said that only lost people will suffer in the Tribulation?

Directing Questions

These questions allow us to maintain focus in our discussions and Bible studies. They are an attempt to redirect a wandering discussion. They can also be an attempt to pin down a principle or point.

Examples:

That is a great insight, does anyone else see something different?

Why is Nicodemus going to see Jesus at night significant?

When did you go see Jesus at night and why? Why not?

That is great rabbit to chase but for now what is the major point of this passage?

When Jesus says to feed the poor, help the sick – did he mean us as individuals or ‘the church’ in general?

Active Listening

75% of all communication is non-verbal. We want to observe things like eye contact, posture, tone, and inflection. A good active listener will maintain eye contact at all times. They will lock on to whoever is speaking. A good active listener will nod or give verbal encouragement while listening. When someone listens like this it encourages vulnerability.

Supporting

People need encouragement and support. Try to find something positive to affirm with everyone. This is equally important to do outside the meeting time. We support by sending cards, offering help, or phone calls.

Telling Your Story

A skill that we ought to have in our back pocket is the ability to tell our experience with Jesus. As a growing servant leader, I challenge you to have two stories to tell.

The first story answers the question – how did you first meet Jesus and make Him leader of your life? The second story answers the question – what is He doing now with you and in you?

The First Story

If we answer three questions, we'll have most of this story played out.

What was your life like before you met Christ?

What was the crisis or situation that led you to make the decision to follow Jesus?

What has been the effect on your life afterwards?

Write it out at first. After you get the first rough draft down on paper, tell it to the leaders around you. After you do that – make some of these adjustments. Is your story longer than 3 minutes long? After 2 ½ minutes, most folks are checking out of our conversation. Try to get your story short, yet memorable.

When you get that finished, add these three questions to your story.

Do you have any questions about my story?

Where are you (the listener) at in this journey?
Are you interested in taking this journey with me?

There really isn't any point in telling our stories if we aren't going to invite others to join the journey with us.

The Second Story

Sorry, no formula here but here are some questions to at least get you started.

What is Jesus up to in your life right now?
What is He working on in regards to your character? Your circumstances?
What insights has He showed you recently that led to transformation in you?
What miracles have you recently been a part of?

Telling this story will require us as leaders to choose vulnerability over image manufacturing. That is where the real crux of leadership is – will we choose to be real or choose to perpetuate the image that we have it together? Only vulnerability leads to further healing and transformation.

Telling our story is about humbling telling what our experience with Jesus is like. Life-changing leadership comes out of the overflow of our relationship with Jesus, not as a result of having all the skills mastered.

Working With Different Personalities

It is never fair to label an individual but there are some personality types that are more difficult to deal with than others. We all want to flex as best we can to help others fit and have an opportunity to experience Jesus. At the same time, we don't want to sacrifice the goal of having that experience for the sake of not hurting someone's feelings. Here are some ideas that might help us walk this tightrope.

The Talker

Talkers love being the center of attention. It does not matter the subject, he has an opinion - even if he has no idea what he is talking about. Obviously this hinders community. Before you duct tape his mouth shut:

1. Sit by the Talker. This will lessen the eye contact with the leader. Eye contact is an invitation to talk. If he interrupts, you can softly touch him as a cue to wait.
2. Harness his leadership skills. Ask him to lead a discussion or icebreaker. This not only gives the Talker an avenue of release but develops leadership skills.
3. Speak to him privately. Be loving and honest and tell him the dangers of speaking too much. It crowds others out, you are communicating that you have it all together, you're not still or quiet enough to hear God's voice. Develop a way of communicating to him when he is close to the "Obnoxious line." Try to observe a "3 opinion limit" per Life Group meeting.

The Thinker

She is usually quiet and reserved. She will not speak unless specifically asked but notices everything that goes on within the Life Group. The Thinker has a tendency to be drowned out by louder personalities. Yet, the thinker

must also get out from behind her mask if she is going to experience spiritual transformation. Before using water torture:

1. Sit across from her. Eye contact invites response.
2. Direct specific questions her way. Only direct low to medium risk questions unless you have an extremely close relationship. Allow her time to respond.
3. Positively affirm when she does respond.
4. Spend one-on-one time with her so she will open up easier.

The Theologian

The Theologian has forgotten more scripture than we know. He has the danger of either intimidating or annoying non-believers and young Christians. The Theologian can be more concerned about the "right" answer than being real. Before packing a NIV in his mouth:

1. Push him to dig deeper. Never be satisfied with his first answer. Get him to be specific and push him to the next level.
2. Why is always a great follow-up question.
3. Play the devil's advocate with him.
4. Avoid asking easy questions.
5. Let the Theologian lead a Bible study one night.

The Distracter

The Distracter makes coffee nervous. She is a walking bundle of energy and ends up being the focus of the Life Group. Before shoving Prozac down her mouth:

1. Ask her to bring snacks or lead an activity. This will give her some direction for her energy.
2. Make sure to use active learning with the Life Group - a lot!
3. Give her something to do during Life Group - write poetry, art, story - that can later be brought in to the discussion.
4. Spend some one-on-one time with her and ask her what would help.

The Debater

He challenges every point - not because he necessarily disagrees with it, but because he can. While this is conducive to great discussions every now and then, it can shut others up in the group and make them feel threatened and stupid. People aren't vulnerable when they feel threatened or stupid. Before getting violent:

1. Establish some safe ground rules for the group. It is okay to disagree, not okay to attack. Only one person may talk at a time.
2. Talk to the Debater alone and point out that while he has a lot to offer the group, he is hurting community by constantly attacking. The point of small groups is spiritual transformation, not to win an argument.

Leading A Group

Leading a meeting is a good thing to know. Leading a group is better. I think you'll catch the difference once we go through these sessions.

The purpose of our Life Groups is to encounter Jesus and be changed by Him. That's not always going to happen during the meeting.

Leading A Group

L I F E Unpacked

Life Cycle

Holy Moments & Highlights

Life Group Covenant, Sample Covenant

Handling Conflict

Assessing Health

L I F E Unpacked

The purpose of a Life Group is to have a life-changing encounter with Jesus. That is the BULLSEYE we are shooting after. The outcome of these experiences will be fully mature believers of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). So how do you get from the purpose to the outcome? The acronym Life is a tool to help our leaders travel that road.

Love God
Invest yourself
Feed on the Word
Engage your World

Every activity or event of a Life Group should be evaluated as to if it will lead to a life-changing encounter of Jesus. And if it does, it probably fits into one of these four categories.

Love God

(Revelation 19:1-10; Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 12:1-2)

Loving God is simply worship. It is expressed directly to God. It is giving God His due. So can your Life Group worship if none of your members can sing or play a guitar? Well, absolutely! Prayers, letters to God, art, drama, and acts of service are all ways to worship God.

What are some ways we can worship God and not sing?

Invest Yourself

This is an investment of your time, talents, and treasure. The investment is a total giving of ourselves.

How do you spend your money? Do you give to the church? Do you support financially a missionary or mission?

Where do you spend your time? Are you available to serve, to disciple, or to lead? Are you intentionally pursuing a discipling relationship with someone else?

What are you good at or like to do? How are you using that in the Kingdom? Maybe it's acts of compassion or serving in the community somewhere.

Feed on the Word

It is impossible to grow in Christ without studying the Word of God. If prayer is breathing spiritually, then the study of God's word is eating spiritually. It is impossible to be transformed without the Word of God. It is the guide book. We will unwrap this further in the Leading A Discussion and Digging in the Word sessions.

Engage Your World

All of the spiritual transformation in the world is worth nothing if it never intersects the real world. In Matthew 5, Jesus puts it very clear - we are the salt and light of the world. Living at the crossroads of the Greats requires us to engage the world.

This engagement is more than just standing in your world and screaming "Turn or Burn!" It's about serving those outside the group. A group's ability to serve those outside themselves often parallels the community a group is experiencing. If there is good community, there is a desire to serve others. If the group is closed to others, that group does not have community but rather co-dependency.

Life Cycle of a Life Group

So we show up at our first Life Group meeting and all of this just happens, right? We immediately start hammering on the 5 spiritual disciplines and Life. Yeah, right. If you have spent anytime at all in a group, you know it takes time to build trust. So how does a group move from a bunch of individuals who know little to nothing about each other to a small community that is encountering Jesus and being changed by Him together?

Time and tools.

The tools are blending the disciplines while doing L I F and E. The time issue has to do with the life cycle of a Life Group.

Cycles of A Life Group

Show Up

Key Question: Is this worth my time? Are they real?

Getting people together is the first step of building any kind of community. The key question that must be answered: "Is this worth my time." People may never verbalize this but they want to be a part of a group that is growing, fun, vibrant, caring and real.

Other key questions are: Are they real? Do they deal with real life stuff? Are they fake? Are they 'touchable'?

Shed Skin

Key Question: Can they be trusted?

If our Life Groups are going to get to this phase, it will require vulnerability - from leaders. The main reason we don't get vulnerable is because we are afraid of being rejected or condemned. So our Life Groups have to be a safe place to be real. We unwrapped how to do this in the Community Disciplines section.

Share Lives

Key Question: Will I Let Them In?

The more time a group spends together, the easier this becomes. This is beyond just hanging out with each other and being present at significant milestones. It is also an issue of access.

Shape Hearts

Key Question: Will I adjust my life?

This is life change. This is where we begin to see the influence of God on each other by the decisions we are making.

Holy Moments & Highlights

Highlights about the Life cycle

The first two - Show up and Shed skin - almost always happen in that order. Those are the two key questions that every person MUST HAVE ANSWERED before they will choose to be vulnerable OR fit a Life Group in their schedule. People will not be vulnerable with people they don't trust. They will not show up to things that aren't worth the time.

The second two - share lives and shape hearts - are less sequential. A couple of people may decide that they want to be accountable to each other about a specific stumbling block issue. That would be share lives that hopefully would lead to a shaping of their hearts.

However, the reverse could just as easily happen. For example, a shared worship experience may have produced a profound insight for someone, who then shares that insight at Life Group. So he confides in his Life group a major decision he made in light of that experience. In that instance, the shaping of the heart came first then the sharing.

The result is the same - spiritual transformation. What moves a Life Group from one part of the cycle to the next?

Holy Moments

One of my volunteers (Mark Edwards) calls these moments "Thin Places." These are moments where your Life Group sits at a crossroads that will either move them towards more vulnerability or less. These moments will move your group towards more intimacy of Christ or less. They can throttle your Life Group into the next cycle or stall it out.

Space should be created in your Life Group for them to happen - but they can't be manipulated. They are Spirit driven. They can be spontaneous. We don't want to do anything that "quenches" the Spirit. We don't want to manipulate a situation to get an emotional response. But we DO want to capitalize on moments that the Spirit brings to us by boldly following His lead. We DO want to create space for the Spirit to bring those Holy Moments to the surface.

As leaders we have to help others see these moments and anticipate them. This is part of the framing process. Examples are moments of vulnerability from Life Group members, a shared worship experience, or a crisis that explodes in your group.

A Map, Not A Destination

The Life Cycle is NOT the goal. A transformed leader is the goal. The Cycle is a map that tells you where you are at in the journey and what might be coming ahead.

Life Group Covenant

A mini-sermon to help understand the importance of a covenant. We need community. God created us for community (Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-25). Covenants (promises) are what holds community together. God and humanity had a covenant to protect their community. Humanity broke their promise (sin) and thereby destroyed this community (Genesis 3). So what does that all have to do with a Life Group Covenant?

We will have broken, destroyed vessels in our Life Groups which left alone will create broken, destroyed community. If our Life Groups are going to be places of true heartfelt, loving community, then we must have a set of common values (promises) that exist to protect it. These promises make up a Life Group Covenant.

The Value of a Covenant

First, it *explicitly states our Life Group's purpose and direction*. To have life-changing experience with Jesus.

Secondly, it *allows the group to evaluate and determine growth*. Key evaluation questions can be answered honestly and openly when there is a covenant to support it.

A Life Group covenant allows *newcomers to get a good, quick picture of the Life Group*. This is key if new people are going to open up and be vulnerable in a short amount of time.

Finally, it *places everyone on equal footing*. No one is above being held accountable. If for some reason, a confidence is broken within the Life Group, the covenant acts as a protector of the group. It will be easier to confront when everyone has signed off on the same expectations - no matter the age or 'status' of the group member.

The Life Group leader is responsible for walking the Life Group through establishing their covenant. Basically, the group itself determines what standards they want to be held accountable for. There is no set formula for a group's covenant but there should be at least five areas covered in the covenant.

First, it needs to be clear how conflict and wrongdoing are going to be handled.

Second, there needs to be an understanding of confidentiality. Nothing damages community like broken confidences. Cases of abuse, suicide, or someone else getting hurt will require us to involve other parties.

Third, a commitment to show up regularly.

Fourth, an understanding of the purpose of Life Groups.

Finally, the whole group must promise to uphold these guidelines.

Sample Life Group Covenant

Here is what one our Life Group's Covenant looks like.

We commit to:

Meeting weekly for community times together, worshipping together, and studying God's word together.

Serving others outside of our group on a bi-monthly basis.

Coming prepared to the group by praying for one another and studying God's word.

Holding each other accountable

Pray for and reach out to our spiritually lost peers.

Working together to share the gospel with our spiritually lost peers.

Confidentiality – whatever is shared in the group, stays in the group.

A Matthew 18:15-17 process of dealing with a wrong committed against us.

Remaining teachable and open for rebuke or correction when we are in need of readjusting our lives to experience the presence and blessing of God.

We agree to uphold these promises both inside and outside our Life Group by depending upon God, praying for one another and encouraging one another to live according to them. We will do this with grace and truth, forgiving and restoring one another with love.

Handling Conflict

If you have more than two people around, you are going to have conflict. If you don't deal with the conflict, it only gets worse. Left alone, conflict brings with it destruction and bitterness. When we have been wronged and have every right to be bitter, it is important to remember why we confront.

Biblical confrontation has restoration and redemption as its point. We confront to restore and redeem, not to be proven 'right' or justified. Jesus was the same way. His whole point of confronting our sin problem was not to send us to hell but to bring us to right relationship with Him.

Our Life Groups are about living in relationship with each other and God. That means that it is going to get messy. Sin alone can destroy these relationships, but unconforted and ignored sin will destroy the entire group.

Jesus left for us a model for handling conflict.

First, check your own eyes for the logs. Jesus. "How can you help your brother with the speck in his eye with a plank in your own? First take out your plank, then help with the speck."

How is our own walk with Christ? Do we have the same problem and need to ask for forgiveness before we confront the one who wronged us? It's important to be honest about the stuff we own in the process.

We must love the person enough to go to them personally. This means that we do not talk to others about it or garner support for our position. We first work it out with the person individually. Remember, the point of confrontation is restoration. We are to build up the body of Christ, not tear it down. 97% of all conflict ends with the one on one confrontation.

If the person will not listen, we are to take two or three others with us. I would recommend one of those be your coach. Get wise counsel around the situation at this point. They will be able to discern if the issue is a sin issue or just a point of disagreement.

It is possible for someone to disagree with us and not wrong us. Differences of opinion need not escalate into full-fledge fights and arguments. These differences of opinion fall into sin issues when attitudes change and we begin to gossip, backstab, and lie.

As a leader – you are going to be disagreed with. Get used to it. If no one ever disagrees with you, you aren't making any hard decisions and your impact is questionable at best. The responsibility we have as leaders is to listen to those who disagree with us and seek to understand their point of view.

That doesn't mean we do what they want to do. It does mean we lovingly lead them as best we can in the direction we think God is leading us. We still are going to live and lead for the audience of the One. There are going to be disagreements. We don't have to be disagreeable.

If the issue is deemed as a sin issue by your coach and other leaders and the person will still not listen to the two or three, tell it to the church. In our setting, this could mean a couple of things. It could mean the entire Life Group. It could mean the entire Coaching team or Elders. How will you know what to do?

The entire Life Group leadership structure will be walking through this by this time and we will have enough people around the table to discern what is best.

Again, let's remember the point of confrontation – restoration. So the Life Group should pray and seek opportunities to restore him/her to the group. This may mean taking some Life Group meeting time and honestly unwrapping all the feelings involved in the situation. It may mean calling in other Coaches.

If the person still refuses to listen, treat the offender as a non-Christian. This sounds harsh at first, but think of how we are to treat non-Christians. We are to love them unconditionally. We are to pray for their repentance. We are to ask God to open their eyes of their heart to see their need for repentance. We are to serve them. No different here.

If a conflict reaches this stage, there is going to be plenty of leaders in on it and we'll come to solutions that hopefully will allow the offender multiple opportunities for resolution.

Assessing Health

It's a shame that Life Groups don't come with dipsticks and temp gauges. Okay, some do but we have to love them anyway and we'd never call them that to their faces.

In all seriousness, assessing health in your Life Group is mainly about asking key questions concerning the condition of the Disciplines of a Life Group, the Life Cycle and L I F and E.

What is the vulnerability level of your group - high, middle, or low? What is keeping it there? How long have you been there? Are there any barriers to vulnerability in your group? What is helping vulnerability?

Where is your Life group in the Life Cycle?

(Show up, Shed skin, Shape hearts, Share lives) What marked the key transitions into the next cycle? What do you think is next key push?

Would you characterize your group as climbing a spiritual mountain, on the mountaintop, coming down, in the valley, or stuck in a rut? How does this compare with your place as a leader?

How many potential leaders do you see developing?

How much time do the leaders talk versus everyone else?

Of the 5 practices of a Life Group, which one does your Life Group excel at? Which one needs work?

Evaluate your groups involvement concerning L I F and E. Which one is the strongest? The weakest?

If you could change one thing about your Life Group what would it be? Why?

What resources or help do you think you need?

Birthing A Group

Why birth in the first place?

Let's get real with each other – why is it even important to birth? If our Life Group is consistently having life-changing experiences with Jesus, we have incredibly high vulnerability with each other – why would we even want to jeopardize that by 'splitting up' the group?

Great questions that have great answers.

Groups that don't birth, stagnate. Something happens to a group that has great vulnerability but has no vision or plan for birthing. That group becomes extremely hard for new people to get in. And when that happens, you will have stagnation. The people start to take each other for granted. There is a tendency to get complacent.

All of a sudden that high vulnerability becomes a seedbed for complaints and gossip that is packaged in 'concerns' or 'confessions' that has nothing to do with the individual's spiritual formation.

Groups that reach the lost will birth. If our groups are truly engaging the world – they are going to birth. It's part of the Great Commission. We reproduce Christ followers. That means releasing them to do the same thing.

So the larger question isn't are we going to birth, but WHEN are we going to birth. This is a health question. It is NOT a length of existence or number of people question. If we have a Life Group that has been meeting for a year and we have tons of people showing up, that doesn't necessarily mean we are ready to birth. On the other hand, if a life group hasn't birthed in 2 to 3 years, we probably have some health problems in the Life Group.

The following questions are here to assess if our Life Group is ready to birth. I've tried to put the questions in order of importance, but a 'no' answer to any one of these means the group is not yet ready to birth.

Leaders

We reproduce leaders, not groups. The life of Christ is reproduced in individuals, not groups of individuals. The Great Commission is about personally lifewalking with others, not a group.

This is the single most important question to answer. Do we have enough leaders for both Life Groups? Do we have a Life Group leader ready for each group? Do we have an intern for each group?

If the answers are yes for those questions, we might be ready to birth. At the very least we now have the bare bones of infrastructure to birth another Life Group. Without leaders, we are not going to birth another life group. That is destining our life groups for failure.

Vulnerability

What is the vulnerability level of our group? Low, mid, high? If we have a high level of vulnerability – we might be ready to birth. We reproduce what we are – not what we WANT to be. We don't want to reproduce anything less than high vulnerability because we know that it is in high vulnerability that transformation takes place.

There is another reason why the vulnerability must be at a high level. It will be next to impossible to talk about the birthing process without hurting somebody in a context that has less than high vulnerability. Without high vulnerability, people are not going to be able to dive into their feelings of insecurity or fear or dread of having to birth a group.

Life Cycle

Where is your life group at in the Life Cycle? If we are only in the Show Up to Shed Skin phase – we are DEFINITELY NOT ready to birth. If we are Sharing life and Shaping hearts, then we might be ready to birth.

We reproduce what we are – not what we would like to be. So we need to birth groups who have experienced the full Life Cycle.

Life

Has our group consistently experienced L I F E? That doesn't mean we do that every week – although that might be true. What we are looking for is a consistent track record of L I F E. If our life group has a consistent track record in each of those areas, we might be ready to birth.

Critical Mass

If we have positive answers for all of the questions above but it's only 3 other couples, it's time to open up our life group. It's okay to have a small life group as long as we are reproducing leaders. When we have an intern ready to lead but no critical mass, each of you go find someone else to build into and reproduce.

God's Timing

I'm a firm believer that God speaks through community and there is such a thing as timing. Does every leader – formal and informal – around the table agree on the above answers? Do we all see the need to birth? What does our Coach think? Does anybody have a 'gut check'?

Planned Process

Do we have a (somewhat) clear plan of HOW to birth? If we do have a plan, we are probably ready to implement it. It takes time to birth. If everything is healthy and there are no "hiccups," it's probably going to take around 3 months. The fewer green lights from the above list, the longer it is going to take.

If we rush in and try to birth with an unhealthy group, it's going to take even more time. Why? Because after the rush to birth, we'll have to do damage control which always takes longer than doing it right the first time.

Just remember that birthing is a process, not an event.

We're close, but not quite ready

Good news for you! God has just gifted you with where to lead your life group over the next few months. Where we answered no, that is where we begin to lead.

Intern not ready? Get them ready. Get specific with him/her. Is there correction needed? Is it a heart issue or a skill issue? Vulnerability level low in the group? Life Cycle issues? L I F E malnourishment? Whatever the issue, begin to lead the Life Group to health in those areas.

How To Birth A Life Group Without Creating Mass Chaos

Here's a short list of things NOT to do:

Don't start off a Life Group Meeting by assigning people to leaders and say "see ya' in your new group next week.

Don't drag your feet to the point that you have 30 people in your group, enough small children to open an elementary school, and no one else can show up because the "house you meet in is "too small".

Don't act like birthing is never going to happen. Talk about the elephant in the room.

Okay – enough negative thoughts. How about some real life ideas?

After we (leaders) have asked the hard questions of IF we are ready to birth, let's figure out a plan. We also are going to have to cast the vision of birthing to our group. We do this by talking about the elephant in the room – early and often. "We need to birth because healthy, growing things birth, dead things don't." "We need to take others on this journey with us."

How do we determine who goes where? Which people go with what group?

You could assign them. That normally isn't the best option. A better way might be for the leadership team for each of the new groups (Life Group Leader & Intern) to invite people to join them and ask for a "commitment" from them.

Now here is the cool thing – if during the past year you and your intern had certain people in your group to look after and lifewalk with – these invitations work those relational lines.

For example – let's say that for the past year, you had care of couples A, B, and C. In the meantime, your intern was lifewalking with couples E, F, and G. You get to the place where all the Assessment Questions were good.

Now the two new Life Groups have an open invitation for anybody – but you've "stacked" the deck so that each leader has deep relational ties to start each group. The key is that since you are only going to birth if your group is at high vulnerability – you can talk about all the different options in your life group.

Start off small and easy.

Start off meeting in the same house in different rooms. You could meet in different houses that are close to each other after an opening time with each other. Do this for a month or two.

The next month, meet in separate houses 3 out of the 4 weeks, on the 4th week all meet together. Do that for a month or two. Have family reunions every 6 months. Celebrate significant events with each other – like a new believer or major life event. Plan some group activities – like family picnic, bowling, sky diving – to start off the Life Group with a shared experience.

The options are many and are only limited by your own creativity.

The Intern Process

Let's be honest – being a Life Group leader is hard but good. It's frustrating and fulfilling. It's stretching and freeing. It's awesome and horrible. It's also not for everybody. There are some people that should never be on the worship team. It's just too painful – for everyone involved. The last place on the planet for some people is hanging out with teens. The last place I need to be is in children ministry.

So how do you figure that out? Well, that's part of the fun. We 'figure out' our giftedness and 'called-ness' as we go along – seeing what fits and what doesn't in community. That can be painful if not done in a context of unconditional love and honor.

That's one of the reasons we have the intern process. We want multiple opportunities to confirm gifting and calling. We want multiple opportunities to equip people to serve. The process is designed to help figure out calling and gifting as well as equipping for the role of Life Group Leader. Both parts are vital.

If we train and equip for years but there isn't a calling to be a Life Group Leader, we will make every one involved in the process miserable.

Finding Interns (Expectations)

Application and Interview

OJT & Commissioning

Finding Interns (Expectations)

What exactly are we looking for in an Intern? It comes down to two big categories – character expectations and practical expectations. Notice we are using the word expectation. We EXPECT these traits to already be in the mix.

Character Expectations – Interns

I didn't intend for this to be an acronym...it just kind of worked out that way.

Responsive to Christ's leadership. When shown or challenged with a truth from Christ, do they avoid it, ignore it or allow it to conform them?

Available for ministry. Lifewalking takes time. Is there space in life to minister and be ministered to?

Faithful to Christ's expectations. Are they stable? Reliable? Committed?

Teachable regarding actions and activities. How do they respond to confrontation? How open are they to change and dialogue?

If we've got someone who is close but is missing one of these key pieces – let's work with them to get them to that place but at this time they are NOT intern material. Disciple them to the place where they can be an intern. Let's not rush them into the position if they don't meet the expectations.

Practical Expectations

We want interns to have as realistic of a picture as we can paint as to what they are signing up for.

Attend Life Group meetings. They'll meet every week.

Attend and finish a Turbo Group. A Turbo Group is a 10-week intense look at every aspect of the Life Group ministry. (Basically the book you are holding.)

Meet at least once a month with Life Group leader to plan & evaluate group.

Attend the Confabs during the year. (There are four of them.)

Why all the emphasis on 'meetings?' It's not because we like meetings. It's because we value community. Community is not just the why but the how we do ministry. The meetings are a tool for the purpose of community and lifewalking.

Other Considerations

By choosing to be a leader, we've chosen a harder path. We choose to do life in community. That means the phrase "It's not any of your business" can never justifiably be said again. It is our business because we've chosen to do life with each other.

An intern ought to get used to someone knowing them more than they are comfortable with. All of the 'dark places' and 'hidden places' will be exposed – hopefully in a loving, redeeming, and restoring way.

Comfort is not a value for us. Authenticity, unconditional love, and transformational living are non-negotiable values for us.

Character Expectations - Life Group Leaders

Not a new believer

A LGL should be a growing Christian for at least 1 year.

Above reproach

We are not looking for perfect people but people who are moving towards Christ-likeness. Is your goal in life to be who God wants you to be? Is the general direction of your life towards God? It should be very difficult for others to question your motives.

A disciplined devotional life

A growing disciple must spend time in God's word. There must be regular times of silence, worship, study, and prayer in your life.

Faithfully sharing your story

This does not mean standing up at your work or in Barnes & Noble screaming at the top of your lungs "TURN OR BURN, BABY!" It DOES mean that you are looking for opportunities to tell others about your faith. It is not forced, but it is not avoided either. It is strategic. It is not just about sharing your faith with your voice (but it does include that) but also how you live.

We DO NOT expect these things out of our Interns. We want to grow them to this place. Hence, the Intern process.

Application & Interview

An application can be downloaded on our website (www.studentparking.org). It's 12 pages long. Seems to be overkill, doesn't it? Not really.

If a Life Group leader is the front-line pastor, we better make sure there is a gifting and calling to do it.

Who can fill it out?

The short answer is anybody. I think the longer answer is better. As Coaches and Life Group leaders, we ought to constantly be looking for the next generation of leaders. Is she teachable? Is he responsive? Is she available? Is he faithful?

Then ask them to take the leap. Find them and then take them on the journey.

I want to be an Intern but I'm not in a Life Group.

The question back is this - how can you learn to lead something you are not involved in? We value community and authenticity. We are not going to elevate anybody that doesn't also have those values as part of their DNA.

So get involved in a Life Group and start lifewalking. Then let's talk.

Interview

After the application, the Life Group leader, Coach, me and potential Intern will have a 'sit down.' We want to make sure we start the process well and everybody understands all the expectations and the point of the whole matter.

We will ask questions of each other. We will spell out the expectations. We will be honest about the potential blindspots and obstacles that exist as well as incredible opportunities and giftedness that we see.

OJT & Commissioning

There is just nothing quite like "On the Job Training." That's what an Intern does. This book covers most of the "On the Job Training", but let's hit a couple of highlights.

We'll spend (in most cases) a year getting an intern ready. What is ready?

We want a Life Group leader to be able to:

- articulate and know why we do what we do.

- spiritually feed themselves - hence the inner disciplines.

- take someone else on that journey with them - hence the communal disciplines.

- share their story of what God is doing in them - hence telling your story.

- effectively communicate and lead others into an encounter with Jesus - hence how to lead a group and meetings.

release another leader who can do the same things - hence birthing.

Commissioning

We covered most of this in **Ready to Birth** and **How To Birth Without Creating Mass Chaos**. The bottom line is that we birth leaders, not groups. So if the Intern has a hold of the skills AND the heart - we're ready...and that is a thing to celebrate!

Increasing Your Intern's Role

If you remember all the way back near the beginning, we said that an intern's role was to be a sponge while gaining an increasing circle of responsibility.

What does that practically look like? Below is a guide, an idea, a suggestion – but it is by no means the Bible on the subject. The truth of the matter is that every one of our interns are going to have strengths that we need to capitalize on AND work areas that we need to walk through. Figuring those two things out as soon as possible is going to go further in developing them as leaders than anything else we do.

We are going to assume that during the application process for the interns, we learned a few things about them:

- Their spiritual gifts – at least the probabilities

- Their dominant relational style

- Their strongest trait

- Possible work areas and blind spots

This plan of increasing the intern's role is pointless if you don't use the above information. For example, if you have someone who is four kinds of shy – getting him to lead an icebreaker the very first Life Group meeting might be an absolute disaster. However, assigning him to call half the life group every week to pray for them might be right in their strike zone. Give interns tasks that are in their strike zone to start with. Here's why...

1st 3 months

Let them organize meeting place and snacks. Seriously – set the expectation early that we are here to serve. During this time, the main focus of the interns is going to be the condition of their inner discipline life. The leader is going to start the process of walking through the work areas that popped up in the application process.

Why would we tackle the work areas first? We have a tendency to brush away these spots or at the very least believe that they will “grow out” of whatever work area cropped up in the application and interview process. Guess what? They won't. If they were going to grow out of it, they already would have. They haven't. So now love them enough to walk through it with them. Deal with the anger, pride, fear, insecurity, anxiety, or lack of assertiveness. Whatever the issues are, deal with them early and often.

By confronting the issues early, we're setting the table for our Life group, our interns, and our leaders to win. It cements the reality that we are serious about lifewalking with each other. It demands high vulnerability among

the leaders. It sets the tone for the Life Group leader and intern's relationship – they love each other enough to shoot straight with each other.

2nd 3 months

Find the strike zone of your intern. Is it leading an opening discussion or icebreaker question? Let them lead that. Is it praying or leading worship in the group? Let them lead that. Give the responsibility for praying specifically for half the Life Group to your interns.

A word of caution here – if your interns have some serious work areas that there appears to be no movement in, don't put them in a position to lead just yet. Keep walking through the issues, keep focusing on the inner disciplines. Don't give up on them as interns – that defeats the whole purpose of lifewalking! But don't be in such a hurry to place them in a place of up-front leadership. Great leaders need incubation time.

3rd 3 months

Increase their role in leading the discussion. Let them bring the agenda one night. Give them the responsibility of discipling any new believers that are birthed in your Life Group. Assign half of the Life Group to them contact with every week. Start asking them to find someone to intern with them.

4th 3 months

Let them run a series of meetings, weeks in succession. Start to co-lead the life group with each other find new interns for you both. During this whole process, you should be meeting with them every other week – checking on their walk with Jesus, dealing with any new uncovered work areas, and evaluating leadership of the meetings.

The View from 30,000 feet

Again – the above is a guide, not the rule. The goal is to be progressive in releasing and empowering them as leaders, without ignoring the work areas. We want overflow leaders, we want leaders who walk and lead out of the overspill of their relationship with Jesus. That is why those inner disciplines will ALWAYS be THE key piece of discipleship.

Coaches

Our definition of a coach is clear – a discipler of leaders, specifically Life Group Leaders and Interns. If a coach is planning and leading a Life Group – he (she) is failing at their prime mission. Our goal is to have one Coach for every two Life Group Leaders.

So what does coaching really look like? What is the ‘brass tacks’ of it? Here is the big picture answer to those questions.

1. Relational Proximity

This is fancy speak for living close with your leaders. Visit their groups often. Have continuous (weekly) contact with your leaders via email or phone. Grab some face time with them monthly. With consistent contact, you won't have to start at ground zero every time you talk.

2. Soul Care

How are the interns' and leaders' souls? Where are they at in their journey with Jesus? What is the relationship like with the intern? What is the biggest celebration point in their life? Their biggest disappointment? What heart issues are being ignored or glossed over?

3. Stay Macro

Our job is not to fix every problem in our Life Groups. That's the Life Group leader and the intern's problem. Sure we are going to listen and throw out some suggestions if need be, but our biggest concern is the health of our leaders' soul.

On a practical level, we want our leaders to wrestle through issues with Jesus before they start asking for other's opinions. Think big picture, Kingdom mentality. Get in the habit of answering questions with questions that will force them into deeper areas of trusting Jesus. Let them fail, then redeem/restore them.

For the sake of simplicity, coaching is going to fall into 4 areas:

Model

Vision

Correction

Encourage

Model

In John 13:1-14 Jesus does something nobody expected. He washed their feet. At the end of the shocking event He tells them they should do the same.

Jesus never asked anything of His followers that He himself did not do. We have to be the same. Not only will we lead out of the overflow of our relationship with Jesus, but we will also lead out of the overflow of our experience!

The leaders we are discipling have to be able to see at least a glimpse or a part of the target in us. 1 Corinthians 11:1 ought to be our motto! We lead out of the overflow, being a model.

Vision

We are the vision casters. We lift heads up to 're-see' the goal of why we do this. We are the champions for life changing experiences with Jesus.

How do we cast vision?

Communicate

Verbally confirming the goal of encountering Jesus and being changed by Him. Putting the "pursuit of Jesus and His purposes" in our own words in order to tell someone else. Celebrating 'wins' in our Life Groups cast vision. What we celebrate communicates what we value.

Guard

There are too many options competing for priority in our programming, resources, and time. We must ask the hard questions of "Is what we want to do (or doing) going to lead us in experiencing Jesus? Reproducing a leader? Does it lead to spiritual transformation?"

We guard by also evaluating our groups according to our purpose, not by just how many show up.

Correction

Our leaders will need correction in order to develop. Let's make a distinction between two types of correction. It's important that all parties involved know the difference AND know which one is the topic of the day.

Spiritual Correction is about sin issues. Gossip, slander, breaking confidences, and lying. More often than not these are going to be "elephant in the room" issues. In other words, every one knows it's there. It's our job as Coaches to deal with it, gracefully and biblically.

Functional Correction has to do with skill level or lack thereof. Does the leader let discussions wander off and never closes them? Is the leader allowing one person to monopolize the group? Are there habits that are limiting the vulnerability level of the Life Group? These are NOT sin issues - these are just skills that need to be sharpened.

There might be times when an issue is both spiritual and functional. In those instances - shoot for the heart issues first.

Correction doesn't have to be a nightmare confrontation. Let the leader do a self-evaluation. Chances are the issue is already known. In fact, the best way to coach is to ask questions to see if the leader can figure it out on their own. Some examples:

How did you think the meeting went?
What went well and what could improve?
If you could do this meeting over, what would you do differently?
Do you feel like you adequately prepared for the meeting?
How could you have prepared better?
What did you enjoy most about tonight? Least?
How can I help you continue to improve?

Helpful Hints of Correction

Correction is done one on one, NEVER in front of the Life Group. Do we really need to explain this one? Talk about creating bitterness in our leaders.

Use the praise sandwich. Start off by praising what was done right then deal with the correction area. Before we end, affirm the things they are doing well.

Have action points. Give the leaders something concrete and measurable they can work on.

Follow up and feedback! Always check back in after correction to see how their heart is doing. Allow some time to hear what they've learned through the process.

Encourage

Before you get images of standing on the sideline screaming "L-I-F-E!" at your leaders, let's get a biblical understanding of what encouragement is. Let's start with Hebrews 10:24-25.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...let us encourage one another.

The word encourage means "to make sharp, to irritate, to provoke." Doesn't exactly bring images of cheerleaders, does it? Here's the picture I have of encouragement - it's in Matthew 16:16-19. Jesus does 3 key things.

1. **He praised him for his success** (v. 17a). This is absolutely a verbal thing but if you really want to make a marker for one of your leaders - write a note. Or show up at the beginning of their Life Group and "crash" for the first few minutes just bragging on what he or she did.

2. **Jesus points out that God is working in and through Peter** (v.17b). Affirming that someone is being used by God, then pointing out how will do more to make solid your leaders than anything else you do.

3. **Jesus gives Peter more responsibility** (v. 18-19). Jesus gives Peter more responsibility than he could handle. Peter was going to fail. Jesus knew it. More than likely the other disciples knew it. The only person who probably didn't know it was Peter. Yet - Jesus gave it to him.

What does this mean for us? It means we risk. If we want to reproduce LEADERS, then we are going to have give them the freedom to fail. With out this freedom - we are going to have a hard time getting our leaders to step into new territory.

This is why the relational aspect to coaching is so huge. We must have safe, loving, but honest arenas to unpack our failures so that we can learn and grow from them.

A Blessing for the Journey

This is going to be one heck of a journey, full of messes, unexpected turns and miracles. And we are on it together...I think exactly the way God created us to walk.

A Franciscan Travel Blessing

*May God bless you...
with discomfort at easy answers,
half truths and superficial relationships
so that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you...
with anger at injustice,
oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace.*

*May God bless you...
with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*