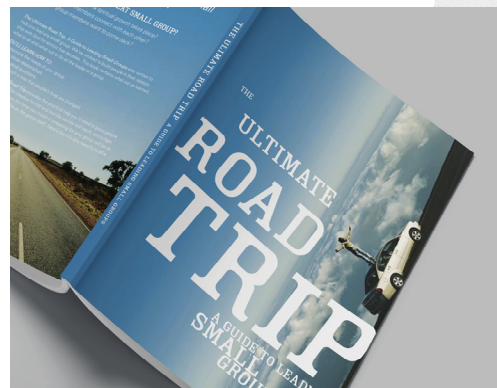


Preparing the Small Group Lesson

Excerpt from *The Ultimate Roadtrip:
Leading a Small Group* by **Rick Hove**.



Available at the CruStore.



CHAPTER 6

*HITTING THE
ROAD*



6.1 PREPARING THE LESSON
6.2 PLANNING THE GROUP SESSION
6.3 DESIGNING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT
6.4 TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FIRST MEETING
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6.1

PREPARING THE LESSON

There are two important phases to preparing a lesson:

First: Apply the lesson yourself.

You can't lead a good discussion and point a group toward life changing application if you haven't studied and applied it yourself.

Study the lesson, asking God to teach you from His Word. Consider how the passage exposes our brokenness. Ask God to show you how he wants you to respond to Christ through what you are learning. If you're personally involved with the material, you'll find it easier to provide personal illustrations.

Second: Discover the big idea of the lesson.

Go back through it and think about how to help the group discover and apply the truths of the lesson. Here are four steps that will help you prepare to lead the lesson.

1 Pray.

No matter how confident you feel in your ability to lead a group, continually ask God to guide you in your planning and implementation. You can plant a seed and water it, but God must cause the growth. You can prepare a brilliant lesson, but God must change lives. Spend time asking God to change you and the people in your group. Ask Him for wisdom and direction as you prepare. It's possible to spend hours preparing for your group time, but bottom line, it's God who uses His Word and Spirit to work in and through you.

2 Discover the big idea.

After you've spent some time studying the passage, summarize the big idea of your passage in a single sentence. "I think the big idea of this passage is -----."

3 Determine the learning objectives for the lesson.

In light of what this passage is saying, answer the following questions: "What do I want them to understand and believe? What do I want them to experience? How do I want them to respond to Christ? (Be sure your application is aimed at heart-resistance to Christ.)"

Write down your answers to 2 and 3 at the start of the lesson. This will help you focus your questions and allocate your time around the key objectives of the study.

4 Go through the lesson and choose good questions.

Select questions and activities that will help group members discover and apply the truths of the lesson. Think of specific examples you can share from your own life. Focus the lesson on the objectives you determined in step 3. Keep in mind that you want them discover and apply the truth themselves.

In Chapter 8, you'll learn how to ask good questions that target the heart and direct the discussion toward your group members experiencing Christ and real life-change.

After you get a good grasp on the lesson, you can choose the various elements which make up your meeting, such as icebreakers (relationship-building activities) and prayer.

6.2

PLANNING YOUR GROUP SESSION

Several questions may come to mind as you plan the group session: What elements should I include in the group this week? How long should I spend on each element, such as the lesson, prayer, fellowship, etc.? How can I best structure the group session to meet the needs of those in the group?

Think about a small group you liked. What made it enjoyable? Your leader probably did some fun things to help members get to know each other. You might have spent time praying. You studied the Bible. You might have gone somewhere together as a group. Think through these issues as you determine what to include in each group session:

- What is the purpose of this group?
- What are the needs of this group?
- What are you trusting God to do in this group?
- How does this specific group session fit your overall purpose?

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MARK'S NOT-SO-BRILLIANT PLAN

The University of North Carolina is a beautiful, sprawling campus, but it's also a 20-minute walk over hilly terrain from end to end. When I wanted to start a Bible study we used a survey to find fifty guys who were interested. I had this brilliant plan of how to save time and make the Bible study more convenient for me.

I didn't have the time to visit all these guys, so I just dropped notes in their mailboxes. I set the meeting for 8 on Sunday night because that's when I had free time. I also thought it would be most convenient to meet in a classroom close by. Boy, was I wrong. When I showed up the first week, I found I had also saved a lot of other people time: only three of the fifty guys showed up that night.

I talked to Shannon, my leader, and he helped me take a different approach. That next week we visited many of the fifty students and changed the meeting time to a weekday. Plus we moved the location to a meeting room in their residence hall. I was encouraged when fifteen guys showed up. I learned my lesson to make things convenient for the guys, not me.

In light of your conclusions, select elements for this group time that will help facilitate your purpose and objectives. After you've selected the elements, determine the time allotment for each element.

Let's consider a small group that has been together for only five weeks. Many of the women know each other from the soccer team. The group leader decides the group session would include a time for interaction with each other (15 minutes), time in the Word (35 minutes), prayer (5 minutes) and announcements (5 minutes). What might happen in each of these four sections?

Components of a Small Group Meeting

1 Interaction with each other.

This is relationship-building time. It may include icebreakers or some other form of sharing time or fellowship. A relationship building time is crucial for any group, even if group members know each other. The leader can use a question, or icebreaker, that will help everyone get to know each other better. It's important for the leader to choose an activity that fits into the time allotted for fellowship. Chapter 6 discusses the importance of building relationships within the group and gives many specific icebreakers and ideas for group interaction.

Never underestimate the importance of creating an atmosphere where people feel at home. Icebreakers or other relational interaction are great for this, and you'll find that food always helps.

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KELLI'S LEADER

Jeanine led the Bible study I was in at Michigan State. The first meeting was fun, but she just wasn't clicking with us during our second meeting. Jeanine had been so intent on teaching the Bible that she hadn't taken time to listen to what we were saying, so we didn't share personal stuff. Plus she wasn't really telling us much about herself.

The next time we met, however, she began the group by talking about some of the fears she experienced the first time she was in a small group Bible study. I could relate to how she hid her Bible on the way to her first Bible study and how she'd always explain to her friends that she was going to study at the library. Jeanine's honesty broke the ice. One girl told them about how her older sister had always warned her to stay away from anything religious. Another girl talked about her doubts about the Bible's truthfulness, something I thought about sometimes. That Bible study helped me get a lot of my questions answered because Jeanine took the time to be vulnerable.

Food is power, they say. It communicates to your group that you went out of your way for them. It also makes people feel more comfortable. Jesus taught 90 percent of the time in the context of a meal.

2 Interaction with God's Word.

This is when the group studies and applies God's Word together. Most leaders see this as the real meat of the group. Interaction with the Word is central, but sometimes the other sections of the group session make the time in the Word come alive.

CAUTION

Icebreakers can run long. If you don't watch it, your group will be one big icebreaker. This isn't all bad at times, but it might communicate to some in your group that you don't value the lesson portion of the your group meeting very much. Maybe they'll think it isn't worth the time to come. You're better off guiding the discussion and planning ahead so you can control the length of the icebreaker.

JESSICA'S COOKIES

I wasn't a Christian when I was invited to my first Bible study. My leader brought cookies to that first group. The next week I came back primarily for the cookies and they kept me coming. I guess you could say God used cookies to lead me to Christ (indirectly, of course).

TOM'S "GOODS"

My discipleship group at Auburn University included four young men—Paul, Hank, John and Matt. Each week we took turns bringing "the goods"—the pop and junk food of choice. Food always brings a sense of community... especially IBC Root Beer in bottles.

3 Interaction with God in prayer.

Spend time praying. As a group grows together, prayer increases in importance. A new group usually won't feel comfortable praying together. So, you can share briefly about prayer, discussing why we pray or how to pray. Give them time to warm up to group prayer. You could pray for the group meeting and maybe ask a more mature member to pray at the end of the meeting. In the appendix you'll find some ideas on how to teach your group to pray.

Some groups, even though they are made up of young believers, enjoy sharing prayer requests with each other. This helps the group bond together and helps their faith grow as they see God's answers. The prayer time might

RANDY'S DISTRACTIONS

I remember the first small group meeting I attended. There was a guy named John, but I never really got to know him because he always sat on his loft. All I saw was the bottom of his Nikes. No one talked. The leader seemed like his mind was on the Bulls' game blaring from the TV in the corner. I was always thinking, How can I get out of this? When the phone rang, I wanted it to be my roommate with some "emergency" which only I could take care of. The material the leader gave us made great doodling paper. I could hardly wait to get out of there.

SUSAN'S SURPRISE SICKNESS

I was leading a sorority Bible study at Clemson. It was our first study and I wanted to make the women feel special, so I made a pie. About ten minutes after eating her slice, one of the women in the study started grabbing her stomach saying, "I don't feel so good." She ran from the room and threw up. I found out later it was something else she ate earlier, but the girls must have been thinking, What is this woman giving us?

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become the group's favorite time.

4 Information about upcoming activities.

This lets your group know what's happening in the ministry so they'll have opportunities to meet new people. In this portion you communicate any details about events going on during the next week or two—the campus weekly meeting, any upcoming activities in the ministry, clarify the meeting time for the next week. You might suggest someone bring the goodies or get a volunteer to help with an icebreaker.

You should always include a teaser for next week's topic to motivate them to come back. For example, "Next week we're going to look at what to do when we blow it in our Christian life" or, "Next week we'll look at biblical guidelines for dating."

Each ingredient helps produce an effective small group, but they won't always be exhibited to the same degree each time your group meets.

An older group might spend more time in the Word and in prayer than a younger group: 60 percent interaction with God's Word, 20 percent interaction with each other, 15 percent interaction with God, 5 percent information about upcoming activities.

These examples aren't perfect models because there is no "right" combination of elements. The leader must make each group session fit the purpose and needs of the group. Sometimes the sessions won't always work out like you planned.

The crucial point in planning your group time is to wisely structure each element to help meet the needs of your group members. A staff member or veteran group leader can help you make wise choices.

6.3

DESIGNING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

A key element to every group is the mood or tone. What happens apart from the content helps to enhance (or sometimes destroy) your group members' experiences. Some groups seem to soar, partly because of a comfortable environment.

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THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES

There are times when the women in my Bible study are really struggling or discouraged. On days like this sometimes we spend more time sharing prayer requests and encouraging each other to trust God. When I take time to meet their needs, it shows I care about them. The women really appreciate these times.

LORI'S OFFERING

I was holding the second meeting of a new Bible study with some women at Louisiana Tech. In the first meeting I had told the girls they could pay for their Bible study books at the next meeting. One of the girl's first visit to the group was at the second meeting. She arrived late just as the girls were passing their three dollars for the books to me. The meeting time ended and as this girl left she pressed a couple dollar bills into my hand and said, "Thank you." I guess she thought we had just collected an offering.

Jesus knew the influence of environment in learning. He taught about the resurrection outside the tomb of Lazarus and about His identity amid the natural beauty of Caesarea Philippi. He taught about prayer in the Garden of

Gethsemane, about faith in a boat, righteous anger in the temple, and evangelism beside a dusty well in a Samaritan village. Each change in environment brought an opportunity to teach another truth. (Don't take this too far. You don't have to move your group every week to match your topic.)

Think about the atmosphere you'll be creating in your small group. Ask yourself, "What can I do to communicate to my group that this is a safe place



Bad Environments for Small Groups

- *Your roommate's "Naughty Cheerleaders of the Big Ten" poster makes the guys drool like leaky faucets.*
- *The phone rings regularly during the group. When it does, everyone stops talking and listens to the person talking on the phone.*
- *The guys in your afternoon Bible study nod lethargically after coming down from a sugar high brought on by a lunch of Snickers and Mountain Dew.*
- *Your roommate keeps coming in every five minutes, saying, "I just need to grab one more thing, and I promise I won't bother you again."*
- *A local rock group rehearses in the room above you.*
- *The room is so dark and musty that sewer workers regularly walk through wearing those lighted helmets.*
- *The room gets so hot that sometimes the members of your Bible study literally become on fire for the Lord.*

for them to come? How can I help people be comfortable? How do I minimize distractions? What conditions will enhance learning?"

Developing the right environment helps establish a sense of belonging. The environment will influence how people feel about your group, how well they learn, and if they will come back.

Here are some keys to creating a good environment:

- Meet in an informal and accessible location. Often a great place to meet is in the room of a group member as long as it's OK with their roommates. Places such as a church may intimidate new group members. Likewise, classrooms may be familiar and accessible, but they hinder communication and warmth.
- Set your meeting time so that all members are able to attend. Choose a time when your members are likely to be sharp and awake and make sure no one has an ongoing schedule conflict. Friday afternoons and late nights are better for blowing off steam or sleeping than for a small group meeting.
- Arrange the seating so everyone can easily see one another. Sitting in a circle

at the same level will help. Also be aware of the distance separating each member. Try to sit close enough so each person has eye contact and can hear one another easily, but not so close people feel uncomfortable or their personal space is being invaded.

- Meet in a location where you can control distractions and interruptions as much as possible. Unplug the phone and turn down the volume on the answering machine. Put a sign on the door to prevent people from knocking. Turn off the TV. It's also not a good idea to meet in a room where outside noise can interfere with your group.
- Provide refreshments (especially in the first few weeks) to help warm up the group and give people something to do at the beginning of the meeting.

BETSY'S FIRST BIBLE STUDY

The first Bible study I went to was pretty good considering I expected the leader to be stuffy. She turned out to be really fun. The study was so interesting that I completely forgot about the biology midterm I had the next day. The warm brownies made up for me missing dinner. I even found myself talking about things I've never shared before. I was really encouraged to walk with God after that and couldn't wait until our next meeting.

JUDY'S HIDE AND GO SEEK

I led a group in my sorority in which we asked at our meeting who would be interested in a Bible study—about fifteen girls said “yes.” The biggest frustration was that we averaged three or four each time and they were different people every time. Also, people used to hide on the day of Bible study to avoid me. (By the way, I did the same thing a few years before—hide when I was in my first group.)

- Make sure you have good lighting to create a warm feeling. No one should have to look into the sun or toward a bright window. Likewise, avoid dark, catacomb-type rooms. You are developing fellowship, not film.
- Choose a location where you can freely interact and carry out the content of your small group plan. Make sure you have any equipment you may need.
- Bring extra Bibles. Some group members may forget to bring one or won't have a readable translation.

6.4

TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FIRST GROUP MEETING

The first group meeting is a crucial one. People will sometimes decide whether they will return based on this meeting. It's also a unique meeting since sometimes group members are unfamiliar with each other, you, where to meet, etc. Don't be surprised if your first meeting takes a lot of energy and time to get going. It's worth it to make it a success.

Here are some ideas that will help you start off well:

- 1 Visit every potential group member prior to the meeting. If you can't visit everyone, a phone call is more effective than a note. Take the time to be personal on the phone—they need more than just a, "Tomorrow night at 8:00." When you drop by, establish a more personal relationship by asking about their photos, posters, classes, major, family, or how their week has been. Help them see their need to be in a group by asking what they want out of this Bible study. Lastly, give them the details: Make sure they know when and where—write it out.
- 2 Take care of all the details regarding the environment—i.e., the room, time, lighting, etc.

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DAN'S MISTAKE

I was leading a Bible study and early on I asked each guy to share his testimony. The first said, "A friend and I were getting high on my front porch when I was in high school. The wind wasn't blowing at all, but I looked up in this tree and saw a small section of leaves moving back and forth, so I knew there must be a God."

I moved on to the next guy, hoping for something better. He said, "I was at a Christian retreat (this looked a little more promising) and was at a dance. There was a girl I liked but she dogged me. I cried and ran down to the lake. I looked up in the sky and said, 'God, if you're up there, give me a sign.' At that moment a shooting star went across the sky." I looked at him and said nothing.

I looked at the last guy with little hope, and he said, "Well, mine is nothing like that. I was at a youth conference and the speaker asked us to come up front to receive Christ, so I went up front and asked Christ into my life." I was sure glad that last guy came through.

- 3 Be there early to welcome everyone and introduce people to each other. Work like a dog on remembering names.
- 4 Be enthusiastic, regardless of the turnout. If only one or two people come, you may have to alter your plan and overview some of the material you wanted to cover. Be positive and ask them if they know of anyone else who might be interested. Tell them you are really looking forward to the Bible study.
- 5 Choose content that will meet needs in the group and can be done in a short time period. Be sure it's non-controversial and easy to teach. You may not want to have a "lesson" the first meeting, preferring to spend time getting to know one another. However, some people might be coming to your group to just check it out, and they expect some time in the Word. If you decide to include content in your first group meeting, discuss some of the biblical principles for growing in faith or for being in a small group.
- 6 Be careful to plan the actual group time. Give yourself extra time for flexibility so you end on time. You don't want to run long the first group. You might plan your first group something like this:

Sample Schedule for Your First Meeting

- *Introduce yourself. Be personable and real.* 5 minutes
- *Pray. You do it. Keep it short.* 1 minute
- *Have each member introduce themselves.* 5 minutes
- *Icebreaker.* 20 minutes
- *Communicate purpose of your group time.* 5 minutes
- *Content.* 15 minutes
- *Introduce the material, cover details.* 5 minutes

- 7 DON'T put people on the spot by asking for their testimony or having them pray when they aren't prepared to do either. Depending on your group, you can also have some strange conversations that aren't appropriate for the group if you ask too much. Ask safer questions at first.
- 8 Don't blow people away with your big words, grandiose dreams or spirituality. If you start your freshman group with a lecture on how this group is going to reach the world, you might not have a group left.

9 Be real. Share with the group some of your own journey with the Lord—your ups and downs along the way. Put yourself in their shoes. Remember, they probably don't know what to expect, so help them feel at ease.

10 Be positive when asking people to come each week. You might say something like, "You know, one of the things I'm looking forward to about this group is getting to know each other. If seven of us are here one week and four different people the next, we'll never develop a sense of unity, and we'll never get to know each other. I'll be here every week and hopefully everyone will be able to make this time a priority so we can get to know each other."

Follow up with each person later and ask if they think they can attend the group regularly. Give them room to say "no," but encourage them.

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AFTER YOUR FIRST GROUP MEETING

- Take some time to thank God for your group and the meeting time.
- Try to drop by and see each member at least once before the next meeting to get to know them better and get feedback. You might do something social, but don't force yourself on them. Let them know you care about them as a person.
- For the first couple weeks remind your group about the meeting a day or so before. This can easily be done with a short phone call. After a couple of weeks it will be in their schedule.

FOR THOUGHT / DISCUSSION

- 1 *Share your first small group experiences. What can you learn, good and bad, from them?*
- 2 *Agree or disagree: How people feel during and after the first group meeting is more important than what they learn?*
- 3 *What are some specific steps you can take to create a good atmosphere for your group?*
- 4 *Does this chapter put you under the pile? If so, in what ways? (For the excessively forlorn and downtrodden, check the “Empty Tank” section again!)*



Doesn't it seem like there are a million details to starting a small group? Well, you're right. There is a lot of stuff to think about, to plan, to implement. The things talked about in this lesson are the ideals of helping you get a group together. You can't do everything and things do go wrong. You may run overtime your first meeting or mess up someone's name five times. The conversation might go off on weird tangents. Just relax. Everything doesn't have to be perfect. Trust the Lord, care about your people, and give it your best.