



Soul-Shaping Small Groups:
A Refreshing Approach for
Exasperated Leaders
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“In this book you will find not just theory, but the kind of roll-up-your-sleeves-let’s-get-it-done wisdom that real-life small group leaders desperately need. Whether you lead that movement in the church, or lead a single small group, or are a small group member, or are thinking about grouping—this book is the real deal.”

—From the foreword by John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and author of *The Me I Want to Be*

A New Kind of Small Group

How do we get to the place where we have stories to share that testify to the truth that Jesus is indeed alive and meets us in countless different ways on the journey? How do we cultivate small groups that see with the contact lenses of faith? . . . The following . . . will help guide the leader in creating transformational small groups that lead people into an “aha” recognition of the God who has been there all along. . . . This structure is intentionally geared toward pulling group participants into an experiential awareness of the God who is with them now, and who waits to be recognized. . . .

In small groups we usually spend gobs of time sharing what is happening in our lives, but little time sharing it, as a community, with Jesus. There is nothing more deadly in small groups than to have one person hoard too much time with a “request” (unless of course it is a real crisis). Instead, I recommend that after one individual *briefly* shares, everyone in the group goes back into prayer to listen and silently lift the person to God. Sometimes I will tell them to imagine the person basking in God’s light and receiving God’s joy. In my model, listening involves a sixty-second quiet time, after which the group is invited to pray aloud for the individual. Scripture verses, words or phrases can be spoken in this period as well. With four people in a group, the entire process for each person should not last longer than ten minutes (five minutes if you have eight). It is important for the leader to honor this time limit and encourage people to pray for each other for longer periods during the week. . . .

Authentic sharing and humble surrender to God in small group settings draw us magnetically. God works differently with people, and often there is a pattern of interaction that is unique for each person. Just like God spoke to Daniel in dreams and to David through prophets, so we begin to decipher God’s ways with certain individuals, based on the purpose and calling of each. Once, when I was wondering if I should do a certain ministry task that felt enormous and yet seemed like a good thing, I was ambivalent about how to move forward and felt depleted just thinking about it. One of the members of the group said, “If I am remembering, the message God seems to be giving you over and over—it is kind of the theme for you lately—and that is that you don’t need to do things that drain you. If they drain you, you are out of your call, since he has not empowered you to be able to do it out of a sense of abundance.” This comment came out of a time of listening, and it was said with such humility and genuine care that it resonated deep within my soul. I had lost perspective on my spiritual journey and had forgotten that, yes, this was an ongoing message to me. I am a classic codependent in recovery, and yet I still often find myself feeling obligated to do everything. The community of faith around me helped me to remember this.

With authenticity at the core, groups can become safe places that foster trust between people and ultimately foster trust in God. Humility breeds authenticity. The power of authentic sharing with humility happens when there is trust. This element of small groups is



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critical, and wherever it is, there will be a magnetic draw.

In one small group that I led, someone asked me why she needed to share. Her point was that God already knew what was going on with her anyway. We talked about this as a group and we agreed that in sharing the specifics of her life with God in prayer she would grow in her relationship with God. She would learn the secrets and insights of God's heart. She didn't share with God to inform God of something he didn't know. Rather, she shared her life specifics with God so that God as "stranger" could be transformed into God as "friend."...

The following story . . . well illustrates the importance of asking. One Sunday morning, instead of filling up every bit of free space with my words, I asked people to pray, and we did that in silence for a while. The sermon had been on the discipline of asking God for specific things. I had pointed out that sometimes we don't ask for what is on our hearts because we don't believe that we are heard or that God honors those desires. I took some time at the end of the service to give people a chance to do this. We invited God into the things that concerned us, much the way the disciples on the Emmaus Road invited Jesus into the things that were making them sad. I told the congregation that every word they spoke was held by God with great honor, much the way God holds each sparrow that falls, and even if and when requests were wrong, it still delighted God when we trusted him enough to ask. . . .

At the end of the service a man came up to me. He had tears in his eyes. "I want you to know," he said, "that I have had chronic intense constant pain in my foot for a long time. It was so bad that I had to park in one of the handicapped spaces when I drove here today. So when you told us to ask God for what was really on our hearts, I asked God to take the pain in my foot away. I hadn't asked because I felt like it was sort of selfish. But when I did ask him, the pain left. Just like that. Right now I am walking for the first time in a long time without pain."

I smiled, but this did not really surprise me. Things like this happen when God is invited into authentic community and open hearts. My response was rather unspiritual, but it made him laugh. "You better pretend to limp back out there," I told him, "or someone will end up giving you a ticket for parking in a handicapped space." ...

At times, authentic sharing is not easy. The pain in our lives may be too hard to voice. When Jesus first asks the disciples what they were talking about, they "stood still, looking sad." However, when they shared as much as they could, Jesus came alongside and accompanied them on the journey. Jesus joined them not only on the physical journey but also on the psychological/spiritual journey from despair to hope. . . . In leading small groups I have found that when people share authentically with God and with each other, *the very things that have caused the most pain are used by God to bring the most joy and insight in the end*. It is often through the lenses of pain refocused that we see Jesus the best.

—Adapted from chapter 5, "A New Kind of Small Group"