



A TRAINING COURSE IN
HOW TO LEAD SMALL GROUPS

GROWTH GROUPS

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The strategy of growth groups

Christians meet in many kinds of groups for a variety of purposes: church committees, property maintenance, choir, youth groups, ministry training, sharing and support groups. Some of these are task-oriented groups; some are for friendship; some are for teaching and input. Groups such as these tend to have a primary purpose, as well as secondary consequences, such as building closer relationships between the group members.

This diversity of groups and purposes is valid. However, there is such a thing as a distinctively Christian group with a distinctively Christian purpose. This type of group is the subject of this training course. We could quite properly call it the Christian group. Instead, in this course we call it a ‘Growth Group’.

1.1 MINISTRY GOALS FROM COLOSSIANS

What are the goals of a Growth Group—its primary purpose, the reason for its existence? What is the ministry of a Christian group? To answer these questions, we need to consider the reasons Christians meet and the instructions given to groups of Christians in the New Testament. By doing this, we discover God’s word and his agenda for Christian groups, which

usually are called churches.¹

Throughout our training we will study Colossians, and so let's begin by formulating some goals for Growth Groups from this epistle. We could use any New Testament letter to the early churches or, more properly, study them all, since all are God's Word to us. For practical reasons, we will look at Colossians, asking this question: What are the essential aims for a Growth Group?

Possibly the topic sentence of Colossians is 2:6,7:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

"Receiving" Christ in these verses is not referring to some sort of mystical encounter where Christ enters our hearts. It has to do with something that the Colossians were 'taught' (in v. 7). We don't usually think of 'receiving' a teaching or a piece of information, but that is the word that the New Testament often uses to describe the way that the gospel was passed on from person to person, and generation to generation (cf. 1 Cor 15:1ff). When the Colossians 'learned' the gospel (from Epaphras, 1:7), they received Christ.

Here, in chapter 2, the apostle is appealing to them to remain steadfast in their faith in this gospel, in the face of legalistic alternative gospels, and to continue to accept Christ's lordship over daily living.

We take our goals for Growth Groups from this instruction. We define our goals as:

- TO RECEIVE CHRIST AS LORD
- TO LIVE WITH CHRIST AS LORD

The goals of Growth Groups are Christ-centred, not group-centred. Let's look in some detail at what it means to receive Christ as Lord and to live with his Lordship.

2 One of the issues worth pondering during this course is the distinction between 'church' and 'small groups'. There may be logistical and structural differences between them, but are there any *theological* differences?

Receive Christ as Lord

When the Colossians received the gospel of Christ, and put their trust in it, they received Christ Jesus himself. They were once slaves in the dominion of darkness (1:13), but now they are “in Christ” (see 2:6,7,10,11 etc); now they have all the fullness of God that was in the Son. We cannot drive a wedge between Christ and the gospel of Christ—as if we become Christians through hearing the gospel but then get to know Christ personally later on. We only know Christ as he comes to us in the gospel, offering us redemption and reconciliation with God. This is why Paul can describe his whole ministry as proclaiming Christ: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Thus, imparting right knowledge and understanding is central to Christian groups. Receiving Christ means being taught something; it is about learning and understanding and wisdom and knowledge. Salvation and godly living depend on these things, and they are only to be found in Christ. In our groups, we therefore aim to:

- understand God’s grace in all its truth (1:6);
- be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (1:9);
- have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that we may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3).

The Scriptures teach us many things about Christ. As we learn these things, take them to heart, and put our trust in them, we grow in our personal knowledge of Christ. He reveals himself as he speaks through the Bible, and we get to know him as a person, as we learn and embrace **all that he is**, and **all that he has done for us**.

All that he is (1:13-20; 2:9-10):

- the image of God
- the creator
- the owner of creation

- the reason for creation
- before creation
- the sustainer of creation
- the head of his church
- the beginning
- the firstborn from among the dead
- the fullness of God
- supreme
- the head over every power and authority

All that he has done for us:

Throughout Colossians, the main verbs describing God’s saving work suggest the richness of his grace in Christ:

- qualified to share in the the inheritance of the saints (1:12)
- have redemption, the forgiveness of sins in the Son (1:14, 2:13)
- rescued from the dominion of darkness (1:13)
- transferred into the kingdom of the Son (1:13)
- presented holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (1:22)
- made full in Christ (2:10)
- circumcised in Christ, putting off the sinful nature (2:11)
- buried with Christ in baptism (2:11)
- made alive with Christ (2:13)
- died with Christ to the basic principles of the world (2:20)
- raised with Christ through faith in the power of God who raised Jesus (2:12)
with Christ (3:1)
- will appear with him in glory (3:4)

In knowing Christ, we are rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into his kingdom of light. This is what faith is—it is personally knowing Christ; it is understanding who he is and what he has done for us in such a way that we put all our trust and reliance in him.

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

COLOSSIANS 1:22-23

Receiving Christ is never an academic or merely intellectual exercise. It is a relationship of personal knowledge; it is a relationship of trust based on what we have learnt. Our Growth Groups must stimulate people to receive Christ in this way, and to continue strong and steadfast in the face of many alternatives.

Live with Christ as Lord

The knowledge of Christ as Lord and Saviour entails living with Christ as Lord. This means:

Remaining faithful—rejecting other lords and their religions

In the salvation of Christ we are full and complete, needing no supplementary religious knowledge or duty. Our faith must be in Christ alone.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

COLOSSIANS 2:8-10

The prohibitions on religion are repeated throughout: we ought not be deceived by fine sounding arguments (2:4); we are not judged by what we eat and drink (2:16); we ought to avoid false humility and the worship of angels (2:18); we must not be puffed up, lest we lose connection with the Head (2:19).

In contrast, we are twice exhorted to continue: continue in our faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (1:22-23); and continue to live in him (2:6). Epaphras' prayer is also our group prayer: "that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (4:12).

Submitting to Christ in every sphere of life

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3:17). The source of this new life is not immediately apparent to the world, for it is a life “now hidden with Christ in God”. Christ is our life, but this will only be revealed when Christ appears (3:3-4).

Other verbs in Colossians highlight the totally transformed life of the Christian:

- live a life worthy of the Lord (1:10)
- please the Lord in every way (1:10)
- bearing fruit in every good work (1:10)
- strengthened with all power according to his glorious might (1:11)
in the faith (2:7)
- have endurance and patience (1:11)
- giving thanks to the Father, joyfully (1:12)
to God the Father through Christ (3:17)
- be thankful (3:15)
- overflowing with thankfulness (2:7)
- set your hearts on things above (3:1)
your minds on things above, not on earthly things (3:2)
- put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature (3:5)
- rid yourself of all such things as these (3:8)
- put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (3:10)
love (3:14)
- clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (3:12)
- bear with each other (3:13)
- forgive as the Lord forgave you (3:13)
- let the word of Christ dwell in you (3:16)
- submit to your husbands (3:18)
- love your wives (3:19)
- obey your parents (3:20)
- do not embitter your children (3:21)
- obey your earthly masters (3:22)

- provide your slaves with what is right and fair (4:1)
- devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful (4:2)
- be wise in the way you act toward outsiders (4:5)

The sum of the Christian life is continuing to live in:

- faith in Christ Jesus (1:4, 2:5)
- love for all the saints (1:4)
- hope in what is stored up for us in heaven (1:5)

1.2 GROWTH GOALS

An image used repeatedly in Colossians is *growth*. This provides us with another way of expressing the purpose of Growth Groups—and a way of explaining their name.

Gospel growth

Paul rejoices in the growth and fruitfulness of the gospel (1:6). His commission is to proclaim Christ to everyone, including the Gentiles (1:24-29) and he can say that the gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (1:23). He calls for prayer for his world-wide mission and exhorts the Colossians to be wise in winning outsiders (4:2-6).

Christian groups are committed to the spread of the gospel. They are created by hearing the word of truth (1:5), so they naturally share in the gospel enterprise.² To evaluate our Growth Groups we should ask: Is the gospel reaching more people through our group?

Christian growth

The gospel grows and bears fruit by transforming people. We are to grow in the knowledge of God (1:10) and it is God who causes the body to grow, through connection with Christ the Head (2:19). Epaphras prays for growth towards maturity (4:12).

² More on this in Training Topic 9: *Gospel growth through Growth Groups*.

Our goals for Christian growth can now be summarized:

- **to receive Christ as Lord**, which means personally knowing and trusting Christ:
all that he is, and
all that he has done.
- **to live with Christ as Lord**, which means:
remaining faithful—rejecting other lords and their religions, and
submitting to Christ in every sphere of life.

To evaluate our Growth Groups, we should ask:

- are our group members receiving Christ as Lord?
- are they living with Christ as Lord?

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Pitfalls for growth groups

3.1 DANGERS IN SMALL GROUPS MINISTRY

There are some worrying trends in the small group movement within the church. You can detect the dangers in this kind of testimonial from a small group member.

We had a great time in our small group last night. I was able to talk about my brother's illness for the first time. There were lots of tears and hugs and we prayed together for healing and faith. We really felt the presence of God. It was a little taste of heaven. Actually, I'm finding the whole small group experience is bringing me closer to Jesus as we get closer to each other. There is a real sense of community, not like at church on Sundays. It's great being able to let others know what is really going on inside and then feel accepted for what we are. And as we experience God's healing in us we can reach out to others in need. There is a real sense of mission together.

The small group movement has developed its own buzz words, words like 'community', 'experience' and 'mission'. At first glance, these words and ideas seem to be fundamental to Christianity, and we are attracted to the kind of ministry reflected in the testimonial above. However, in small group ministry such words are now loaded with meaning and connotations which

need to be challenged. The buzz words expose some of the dangers in Christian small groups—dangers which threaten the heart of the gospel.

Community

God himself is three eternal persons in relationships of love and unity. The Father loves the Son, speaks to the Son and sends the Son into the world. The Son loves the Father, obeys the Father, prays to the Father. The Spirit is sent from the Father and Son to glorify the Son.

God created man and woman for relationship; people are social beings by God's design. Mankind's rebellion towards God and his created order is exposed in the breakdown of relationships we experience in this world. The biblical story of the Fall is the pattern of all human experience—ever-widening circles of evil from deep within the heart of man, posing a permanent threat to the possibility of community.

Onto this scene comes the gospel. The gospel is God's work of reconciliation, a work of restoring the community of God and humanity. This most profound healing power is found in the cross, where the curse of sin is broken. On the cross, the Father forsook the Son, breaking an eternal communion for the sake of the restored communion of God and man.

Christians are thus bound together in a new society of those who belong to Christ, and we are being transformed by him. The distinguishing mark of Christian disciples is love, as we share in genuine community with honesty, unity, forgiveness and good deeds. We wait for heaven, the perfect community where all enemies of loving relationship are crushed under the feet of the risen Lord.

If *relationships* are fundamental to Christianity, what dangers can there be in stressing community in small groups?

- The purpose of the group can easily focus on the development of human relationships. A successful group is seen to be characterised by intimacy, vulnerability, openness, forgiveness and so on. This emphasis on human relationship is often at the expense of knowing God and the salvation of Christ. J. I. Packer observes that there has been a shift in the purpose of small groups in the last 25 years: "It is not so much thought of as a way of seeking God as much as seeking Christian friends. The

vertical axis is not emphasised as much as the horizontal axis.”¹

It is not that prayer and Bible study are absent, but they are seen as tools to create community.

- The distinctiveness of Christian groups can be lost. The activities are irrelevant because any group following the principles of small group theory will result in intimacy. Look at what happens in Weight Watchers, AA groups, special interest groups and social clubs. They all provide a sense of genuine community. The problem in many Christian small groups is that they are no longer distinctively Christian.
- The formation of community is often not rooted in the gospel of Jesus' death for sinners. Small groups can draw together on a multitude of bases: personal needs, political agenda, stage of life, interests and so on. But groups of Christians are built on one distinct and unique foundation, being children of God through faith in his Son. If the gospel is not at the heart of the group, it may be a group of Christians but it is not a Christian group.
- Groups preoccupied with community tend to become problem-centred. They become highly introverted, focussing on their own needs. If community is the aim, the ideal group is open, accepting and affirming—a haven for broken, alienated lives. It is very attractive, because we all have times of hurt, grief and disappointment living in this sinful world. A group that will put its collective arm around us and give a reassuring hug is not a bad idea. But such a group becomes problem-centred. The energy of the group is directed toward those with problems, and we all have problems all the time!

Christian groups are not primarily about helping people with their problems. You probably can't believe you just read that! It sounds positively *unchristian*. But it is true. The focus of Christian groups is *growth*, not problems. We are seeing this in our study of Colossians.

Take the case of someone in your group who is unemployed. In a problem-centred group, she will feel free to talk about this, the group will listen and empathise. They will ask at appropriate times how the job hunt is going and even join in searching out employment for her.

1 Quoted in W. Bird, 'The Great Small Group Takeover', *Christianity Today*, Feb 7, 1994.

They will be aware of associated problems such as self-esteem, and try to talk this through. When her cash flow gets really tight, they discreetly pass round the hat and buy a week's groceries. Others who have been retrenched in the past become particularly helpful.

What a great group to be in! Who could ask for more? You could. Such a group, although made up of Christian people, is not distinctly Christian. There are many support groups in the community which would do the same things—some better, some worse.

In a growth-centred group, all of this will be done, and more! The distinctly Christian element is to pursue growth in the knowledge of God and obedience to him. So prayers will be offered, not only for a job, but for faith in Christ, patience, endurance, avoidance of self-pity and so on. Through group and private discussion, the unemployed woman will be strengthened in the great truths of God's providence and taught to see her situation through God's eyes. In other words, she will be helped to grow as a Christian.

- If community is the goal, the small group has become the end rather than the means. Instead of meeting to hear and respond to God in his Word, the functioning of the group is central. True Christian ministry will see small groups as a means to an end, in the best sense of the phrase. In relationship with each other, we teach the gospel and pray and spur each other on toward godliness of mind and action.

To summarize, our primary reason for joining a Growth Group must not be to get closer to each other, but to grow in Christ.

Experience

The enthusiastic testimony given for small groups above expresses a common sentiment: that the small group experience brings people closer to God. 'Experience' is another groups buzz word, because it is a profound experience to meet regularly in a small group. This is especially true in a society hell-bent on isolation and privacy. But for some who promote the small groups movement in the church, the experience of intimacy in the small group has become everything. They urge that the reality of God is found primarily in the experience of being close to others

in a small group and finding ‘healing’ of emotions and hurts through this closeness. In this way, the group is said to bring us right into the presence of God.

There are several dangers with this view, which severely undermines the gospel.

- We create our own small group god. If we determine God’s character and will from the small group experience, we will create our own small group god. This imaginary god may have little resemblance to the one true God. Our small group god might be welcoming and affirming, but is unlikely to be the God who wiped out Pharaoh for his insolence or who killed Ananias and Sapphira for their lie to the Holy Spirit! Such a God would be too discomfoting in a small group experience. We will have moved from Christian revelation to mysticism.
- Our faith can be in the small group experience, not in Jesus’ mediation. If the small group makes God real to us, and brings us closer to God, our salvation lies in the quality of that group experience. Presumably, in some groups we would be deemed further from God because the experience is diminished. This has moved a long way from the absolute assurance of God’s favour for those who cling to the cross of Christ.
- Experience is the god of this age. We can create all kinds of small group experiences, from songs of praise to primal screaming. Who can tell what they mean? Of course we feel great in a warm affirming group, but to label this feeling as being ‘closer to God’ is an unwarranted leap in thinking.

Mission

Small groups easily become small teams. Significant things can be achieved through a disciplined, committed team with common goals. This leads small group supporters to talk a lot about mission. The mission of the group will be defined by what the group perceives itself to be achieving. If it is aiming for community, it will want to draw others into that community. If it is working for experiences, it will seek to share those experiences with others.

The net effect of these goals can be to see mission in social terms, with evangelism as an optional extra. Mission becomes a ‘horizontal’ activity—between one another—rather than a ‘vertical’ activity—bringing others to God. The preaching of the death of Christ to a dying world is too often seen as a narrow understanding of mission, one that is out of touch with a holistic

(another buzz word) view of meeting all human needs.²

3.2 THE ANTI'S OF SMALL GROUPS

There are some further implications of the small group focus on community, experience and mission. If these are misunderstood, small group ministry can become:

Anti-preaching

The value of proclaiming the word of God is diminished in favour of small group discussion and personal discovery. The experience of the group process in Bible reading is prized above the actual message. The sermon is seen as an inferior context for learning about God, because the experience may be less than scintillating. This is not what we want. Small groups ought to generate a thirst for good preaching, because they develop a hunger for God's Word.

Anti-the minister

Small group ministry has become a lay movement, responding to perceived deficiencies in the churches. It can be a way for the laity to take power for themselves, in competition with congregational pastors. Some parts of the small groups movement are avowedly 'anti-clerical'. It is right to see the limitations of only having the professionals do the work of ministry. Small groups are a superb way for every Christian to get involved in ministry. However, this must not be an expression of mutiny, rejecting the authority of recognised, trained, Bible-teaching pastors.

Anti-the church

The closeness of community in small groups is prized above the total congregational life. In short, group members reduce commitment to church. This is a disastrous result and creates isolated, unaccountable groups each doing what is right in their own eyes and not pulling together to make the whole church more fruitful.

2 We will look at this issue further in Training Topic 9: *Gospel growth through Growth Groups*.

Gospel growth through growth groups

9.1 LOOKING INWARDS

Christian groups can become highly introverted, focusing on their own needs. Minority groups in society tend to withdraw into ghettos to find safety and comfort with other members of the same 'tribe'. It is a natural instinct for self-preservation in a world which is hostile or indifferent to the Lord.

Christian groups tend to become emotional support groups, the energy of the group being directed toward those with problems. We all have problems all the time and these problems tend to set the group's agenda.¹ One by-product of problem-focused groups is their inability to have an impact outside the group.

9.2 LOOKING OUTWARDS

Growth Groups can't afford to be introverted. It is contrary to their very nature. The group has been created by the word of the gospel, drawing the

¹ See Training Topic 3: *Pitfalls for Growth Groups* for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

group's members to Christ and to each other. How can they *not* become a vehicle for communicating this message to the world?

What, then, is the mission of Growth Groups beyond itself?

We see something of the answer in our study of Colossians. In Colossians 1, we see that God is working through the preaching of the gospel. This gospel is bearing fruit and growing around the world. This growth is seen in the Colossians through their faith in Jesus, their love for other Christians and their hope in heaven. This gospel growth comes through God and his human agents as they bring the gospel to others. In chapter 4, Paul expects the group at Colossae to be involved in gospel growth in three ways:

- praying for gospel preachers;
- being thoughtful about relationships with unbelievers;
- speaking graciously but firmly of their Christian belief.

9.3 GROWTH GROUPS AS EVANGELISTIC TEAMS

Growth Groups facilitate teamwork in evangelism in several ways.

Overcoming fear

It is more comfortable inside the ghetto. Our fellow tribe members understand and accept us. When we become evangelists—moving out of the ghetto to invite others to join it—we are not popular. Evangelism also presents a communication problem. We want to tell people of the gracious loving Father who has given up his Son to make them his children. But evangelists are seen as narrow-minded, bigoted, moralistic ratbags infringing on other's civil rights. Who wants to be tarred with this brush?

Working together in evangelism helps to overcome this problem. It puts some steel in our souls as we pray, go on some gospel forays together and patch up each other's wounds. We can keep each other going when the response to our efforts is slow or hostile.

Training in evangelism

In Growth Groups we can train each other in taking opportunities,

communicating the gospel and answering objections to faith. We can use the group context to learn skills for evangelizing, and for practising our gospel presentations with each other. It is an ideal place to discuss commonly raised questions about Christianity and dig into the Scriptures to find where these questions might be answered.

Demonstrating the gospel

In a sense, Growth Groups are a visual aid for the gospel of reconciliation. The way we conduct relationships within the group, modelling our behaviour on God himself, is distinctive and very attractive to the outsider.

When people see Christians relating to each other, they ought to be envious. Christians have just as many problems as the rest of the world, but fewer ulcers. We enjoy relationships more, including marriage, because we know how to forgive rather than seek revenge. We are not racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic or elitist. We work hard, using honest scales (Pr 11:1; 16:11). People are more important to us than organizations and bureaucracy. The only thing that bothers us about being poor is being a burden to others. If this sounds like fantasy, it shouldn't. It is a biblical description of what the Christian life should be like.

Exposing unbelievers to Christian relationships confronts them and opens them up to the gospel, which has so obviously given birth to new creatures.

Titus 2:5,8,10 expounds the importance of Christian behaviour in evangelism:

So that no one will malign the word of God...so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us...so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.

Complementing personalities in evangelism

We all have strengths and weaknesses in communicating the faith to others. Some of us are natural extroverts and love talking to anyone about anything, including the news of Jesus. Some like an argument and enjoy the push and shove of religious debate. Others are less articulate, but are very loving in

good deeds. These differences in personality can all be put to good use in evangelism. There are, however, some skills which everyone can use—we can all learn how to invite someone to an evangelistic meeting.

The diversity of Christian groups makes for great teamwork and reduces the unwarranted guilty feelings of those who don't have the personality of a Christian chat-show host. After all, different people will be receptive to different styles of evangelism.

Group bonding

There is nothing like working at the gospel enterprise to build group unity and trust. The petty personality differences that might otherwise disrupt a group pale into insignificance in the face of heaven and hell. Evangelism is a great way to bond a group together, as you share in such a significant endeavour.

Gospel reality, not theory

One of the benefits of evangelistic effort through Growth Groups is that the group is faced squarely with the reality of the gospel. In trying to reach others, the big issues of heaven and hell, how God saves and who God saves are on the agenda. This often throws up doubts and confusion in Christian group members, which can then be addressed. In a group which is not evangelizing, issues can be blurred and the sharp edge of the gospel blunted. The group will better grasp Christian truth and its eternal implications when they are seeing these realities work out in evangelism.

9.4 EVANGELISM IN THE CONSTITUTION

Evangelism needs to be spelt out as a purpose of the group in its very 'constitution'. Along with Christian growth, gospel growth is at the heart of any Christian gathering. Bible Study, prayer and evangelistic effort are the three basic activities of a Growth Group, but if evangelism is just tacked on as an afterthought, it won't happen.

There are **two ways** to build evangelism into the founding constitution of the Growth Group.

1. Evangelise group contacts

In forming the group, agree together to reach out with the gospel to your relatives, friends and contacts. To accomplish this you might choose some of the strategies in 9.5 below.

2. Set a target group

In forming the group, agree together to evangelize a particular target group which is accessible to your group members. Aim for a target group which your members can relate to, based on geography, age, social class, ethnicity, work or social patterns.

Some examples of target groups are:

- a workplace where a group of Christians form a Growth Group to reach colleagues;
- a school, college or university where students plan the evangelization of the campus;
- a group of 10 could join a sporting, fitness or recreational club to slowly build relationships which lead to the gospel;
- there may be a few Christians living in close proximity in a neighbourhood who could reach common friends;
- Christian parents in a school environment could reach other parents;
- Christians from a common ethnic background could team together;
- your group could be part of the wider church strategy by following up contacts through church meetings, baptisms, weddings and funerals.

In fact, members could choose to join your group because they want to be part of a team reaching this target group. In some cases, such as ethnic evangelism, the group leaders might choose particular members because of their affinity with the target group.

Instead of tacking on a bit of evangelism to the group activities, in this way it becomes central to the mission of the group. It sees itself as an evangelistic team and its agenda is strongly influenced by this missionary purpose.

Adopt an evangelist or ministry

As well as the group working at evangelism, they need to learn to be committed to wider gospel work. This can begin with regular prayer for your area, city, nation and particular countries.² A further step in learning to support gospel work is for the group to ‘adopt’ a ministry or evangelist, swapping photos, tapes and letters and so making a strong commitment to a particular work. It may be that you pray regularly for a particular ministry in your church, such as the Sunday school. You might ask teachers to visit your group to talk about their class.

However it is done, this sort of support for gospel work enhances the group’s sense of the great mission of evangelism.

9.5 DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIES

There are simple and straightforward ways to ensure that evangelism is high on your group’s agenda:

- Meet regularly for Bible study, prayer and friendship.
- Start praying for everyone you are reaching, whether individual contacts or a common target group. Make up a group prayer list of every unbeliever you want to bring to Christ.
- Think together about the people you want to evangelize, in order to better understand them and to sort out the best ways of communicating Christ to them. Consider questions such as:

Who is this person and what makes them tick?

What are their beliefs and values?

What influences have shaped them?

What motivates them?

What persuades them something is true: logic, people or experience?

What is their religious background?

What do they know about Christianity?

² See *Operation World: Pray for the World*, by P. Johnstone (OM Publishing/Crossroad, 1993, 5th ed.). *Operation World*, a handbook of the state of gospel growth around the world, is a useful prayer and information resource.

What is their attitude to Christianity?

What are the big implications for them if they follow Jesus?

- Work out how you can make a positive contribution to the lives of your contacts or target group: providing material needs; organizing social events; remembering birthdays.
- Aim to get into ‘meaningful conversation’ about anything other than the gospel with each person. Jumping from light banter about the Melbourne Cup into evangelistic conversations is quite a social hurdle! If you are comfortable in other types of meaningful conversation, the gospel will arise more naturally.
- Work at naturally letting individuals know you are a Christian.
- Invite unbelievers to as many social events with the Growth Group as possible. Make these events purely social—no evangelism. These might be dinner parties, outings or sports—whatever suits them. The aims are to let them see that Christians aren’t aliens, and to make it easier to invite them to evangelistic activities. They are often quite surprised that such a group exists and amazed by the style of relationships.
- Work out ways of introducing the gospel with each person in private conversation (not at the social events).
- Put on a group evangelistic event that is appropriate for your contacts.

9.6 TRAINING THE GROUP

Throughout the life of the group, there are marvellous opportunities for training group members in how to communicate the gospel. When you are active in evangelism, it becomes clear that training is helpful.

There are training courses available which could be incorporated into the group program³, but here are some other ideas for training activities:

- Discuss how to pray for the unsaved and for evangelism generally.
- Discuss subjects such as: overcoming fear and turning conversations to the gospel.

3 See Appendix I.

- Do some 'cold-contact evangelism' at local parks, shopping centres or doorknocking, to develop evangelistic skills.
- Do some newcomer visitation under the supervision of your church leaders.
- At the end of Bible studies, discuss how you could teach the passage to non-Christians.
- Use Bible studies to raise apologetic issues. In this way, the group learns how to use the Bible to answer objections.
- Debrief members about their efforts and offer encouragement and advice.
- Invite a skilled, enthusiastic evangelist to speak to the group.
- Discuss how to use evangelistic meetings: who to invite and how to do it; how to make sure they get there; looking after them during and after the meeting; follow up.
- Discuss how to make unbelievers comfortable when they come to your activities. For example, what should you do about saying grace at a dinner? Should you provide alcohol?

9.7 SHOULD UNBELIEVERS JOIN THE GROUP?

If we are aiming to spread the gospel through the group, why not invite non-Christians to join it? That would seem a natural extension to making the group outward-looking and bringing the gospel to others. It can actually work very well if certain conditions are met:

- The group needs to agree with this step. It may have been part of the original plan for the group or a development that has been talked through.
- The group needs to think through beforehand how to handle newcomers, so the members are welcoming and wise with them. They need to understand the difficulties in joining an existing group, the tendencies to gang up on those with alternative views and for the discussion to centre on the outsiders.
- The joining unbelievers need to agree to the ground rules of the group. It is a group for Bible reading and prayer, not for debating every possible objection to Christianity. If they are willing to try and understand the Bible with us, it will work. They don't have to agree with all we say, but

they must be willing to join in the group activity of analyzing the Bible. When the group prays, they can just listen to our prayers or join in. The success of such a venture depends very much on the unbeliever's disposition—whether they are seeking God or seeking to disrupt.

Advantages

It can be enormously helpful for unbelievers to learn to read the Bible with Christians and to see ordinary people struggling with faith, love and obedience. It can dispel many myths about Christianity.

It can also be a great learning experience for the Christians. Their often cliched answers to questions are challenged and jargon has to be explained. They observe each other interacting with unbelievers—with their personalities and their questions.

Disadvantages

A group which decides to welcome unbelievers is never the same again. Even though the members may be enthusiastic and well prepared, there are, at least initially, inhibitions. There is a sense of having to perform for the unbelievers. This can be overcome as Christians realize that non-Christians benefit much more when they see the doubts, fears and sinfulness of supposedly holy people.

Another strategy

Instead of unbelievers joining the Growth Group, some of your group members could spawn a new group at another time, especially for outsiders. This can be a motivating project for the whole group—they seek to invite their friends to come to this evangelistic group. It might be a short term group which meets for four or five weeks to explain the basics of the gospel.⁴ Those who are converted or on the way might then like to join the Growth Group.

4 See Appendix I for evangelistic Bible studies that could be used in this enquirers' group.

Sample file
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The healthy growth group

Our Growth Groups have particular goals: to grow Christians and to further the growth of the gospel. To attain these goals we need to develop a healthy group life, where the relationships in the group are constructive. It is often the *process* of growing a healthy group which contributes to the growth of its members.

Take for example the group where certain members dominate, putting their points aggressively, insisting on their priorities for the group and creating a defensive climate. At one level, they are having a destructive effect on group life. The group isn't healthy and, as its leader, you want to fix it. The downtrodden members need to be more at home and the overbearing characters need to learn a bit of sensitivity. As you work at improving this aspect of group life, both in the group time and one to one, there can be significant Christian growth for everyone. The timid learn to confront and forgive; the tyrants learn to use their power lovingly.

Growth Groups will never be perfectly healthy, because we are not in heaven yet. Every group will have problems. But problems in groups present opportunities for Christian growth. Expect them, welcome them, use them.

One way to consider a healthy Growth Group is to look at what the Bible

says about Christian relationships, as we have been doing in our study of Colossians. Another method is to use a diagnostic tool, such as the one below.

12.1 A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL: WHAT ARE THE INDICATORS OF A HEALTHY GROWTH GROUP?

This list of indicators provides a diagnostic tool to use like a stethoscope to evaluate the health of your Growth Group.¹

Each of the characteristics mentioned is fundamental to Christian relationships which are shaped by God's generosity and openness in giving his Son. We involve others in our Growth Group because God has welcomed us. We listen to others' contribution because God listens to us and treats us with dignity. We can be open with each other because God sees all that we are and yet calls us his children.

Ownership: each member belongs to the group

In a healthy group, members will feel a sense of 'ownership' about the group.

Symptoms of a healthy group:

- Each member is committed to the group goals.
- Each member has concern for the progress of the group.
- Each member fulfils a particular role in the group.
- They talk about 'our' group, not 'their' group or the leader's group.
- High attendance rates.
- Willingness to stay after the formal meeting.

Diagnostic questions:

- Do some people seem to be part of an 'in' group? Are others on the 'outside'?
- Are there sub-groups where two or three members consistently agree with or relate to each other or, conversely, oppose each other?
- What are the attendance patterns?

¹ Some of this material has been adapted from *Group Leadership* produced by the Health Promotion Unit, Program Development Branch, NSW Department of Health.

Participation: high levels of involvement in discussion

In a discussion, someone gets the ball rolling—usually, the leader. Initially, the members interact with the leader, with different members responding in turn. It's like tennis with a different opponent for each shot.

The leader's aim is to make discussion more like volleyball than tennis, with a complex, unpredictable series of interactions between all members. The leader is still guiding the discussion, but at times fades into the background.²

Symptoms of a healthy group:

- Everyone participating at the level they desire.
- Members communicating effectively, their intended meaning being understood.
- No-one dominating the air-time.
- Avoidance of long two-way conversations with others just observing.
- Absence of unwritten rules or patterns that inhibit communication, e.g. “We shouldn't disagree with others, especially the leader”; “Interrupt others if you want to get into the discussion”; “Only smart, well thought-out comments are accepted here”.

Diagnostic questions:

- Who are high and low frequency contributors?
- Are there shifts in participation, such as high contributors going quiet? Is there anything that has happened in the group that could explain this?
- How are the quiet people treated? How is their silence interpreted? Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Anxiety?
- Who talks to whom? Why?
- Do some members move in and out of the discussion, maybe leaning forward and back in their chairs? At what points in the discussion do they do this?
- Which members influence others? Who can get others to listen to them?
- Which members have little influence?
- Is there any rivalry in the group? A struggle for power?

2 See Training Topic 5: *Leading a Bible study*.

Openness: honesty in self-disclosure

Openness is important in Christian groups. To be honest with God and each other is a prerequisite for growth in Christ. If we are hiding our fears and doubts we cannot receive the comfort of the gospel. If we are covering our sins, we cannot receive the rebuke and forgiveness of the gospel. If we are reserved about our joys and victories, we deny the reality of the gospel.

Openness in the group ultimately stems from a confidence in being acceptable to God through Christ. We are laid bare before a holy God who welcomes us in Christ—we can cope with the vulnerability of being slightly exposed in the group.

Symptoms of a healthy group:

- Emotions are expressed in the group.
- Others are helped to express emotions.
- The group is not frozen when deep emotions are expressed.
- Honest struggle with applications from Bible study.
- Honesty in prayer.
- Acceptance of different personalities.
- Acceptance of criticism without withdrawal, resentment or anger.

Diagnostic questions:

- Are there any taboo topics?
- Are only positive feelings expressed?
- Are members overly nice and polite to each other?
- In what manner are ideas rejected?
- How do members react when their ideas are not accepted?
- What feelings do you observe in group members: anger, irritation, warmth, affection, excitement, boredom, defensiveness, competitiveness?
- What are the signs of these emotions: tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures?
- Do group members try to block the expression of negative feelings? How is this done?

Service: each member using their gifts

The New Testament stresses the variety of gifts and ministries to be exercised by Christians (1 Cor 12, 14; Rom 12; Eph 4; 1 Pet 4). This variety originates from God, who bestows all good gifts on his creatures. These passages illustrate the diversity of gifts and are not meant to be a definitive catalogue. It is often difficult to define exactly the nature of a particular gift listed in these passages because they are not described, only listed.

Gifts are given by God for the growth and unity of his people, and are to be used in love, not in envy and rivalry. There is no limit to the gifts and abilities of God's people. Whatever anyone can contribute to the common good of believers is a gift from God and is to be used faithfully. We shouldn't categorize gifts as 'spiritual' or 'natural', because *all* our abilities come from God, be they cooking, listening to others or leading in prayer. And the gifts of God can be nurtured by training and practice.

There is a wide variety of gifts that can be exercised in a Growth Group: teaching, social organizing, hospitality, music, letter writing, contacting absentees, and so on. Some are concrete tasks, while others are more relational and informal but important for the quality of the group time.

Symptoms of a healthy group:

- Tasks are shared by members according to their gifts.
- It is recognized that members will not perform every task.
- The leader is aware of the abilities of the group.
- Members feel they belong and have particular roles to fulfil.
- Members are experimenting to see if they can be useful to the group in new ways.
- The leader is honestly guiding members about their gifts, encouraging them in areas of strength and pointing out weaker areas.

Diagnostic questions:

- Who is performing what formal tasks?
- What roles are being adopted informally?
constructive: encourager, peacemaker, empathizer, initiator, summarizer, humorist, devil's advocate;

destructive: clown, sympathy seeker, avoider, sidetracker, monopolizer, expert³.

Achievement: the group goals are being achieved

A healthy group will make progress towards its set goals and see some of these goals attained. Some achievements may be difficult to measure, such as changes in people's beliefs. However, most changes will be expressed in one way or another.

Symptoms of a healthy group:

- Members are conscious of their own growth.
- The focus on tasks doesn't weaken relational aspects of the group.
- There is a balance of Bible study, prayer and evangelism.

Diagnostic questions:

- What are members praying about?
- Are group members preparing for Bible study?
- Is there a sense of struggling with obedience to God?
- Is there a concern for evangelism?

12.2 CAUSES OF AN UNHEALTHY GROUP

We have seen above the characteristics of a healthy group, providing its leader with a diagnostic tool with which to assess the state of the group. But what factors make a group unhealthy? If we can work out what is causing the group to function in an unhealthy way, we can take some remedial steps.

The following are some possible causes of ill-health, springing from the individual, the interaction between members, the leaders and from the group context itself.

The individual

Sometimes, the cause of an unhealthy group is focused on an individual. Jane

³ See also Training Topic 7: *The games people play*.

comes to the group, sits in a corner and says very little except to jump down someone's throat when she disagrees on a minor issue. This is not typical for Jane. As we enquire, we find it is nothing to do with the functioning of the group. She lost her job that day. The personalities, mood and circumstances of individuals have a huge bearing on the functioning of the group.

The members

Lack of trust and acceptance

In the early stages of a group, members are often anxious about how they will be treated. They can be afraid of failing, looking stupid and being rejected, or just be uncertain of what is expected of them. Often, the group copes with this lack of trust by preoccupying itself with tasks. Members will use a variety of tactics to avoid threatening topics: rushing through material rather than pursuing it in-depth; fussing over rules and procedures; being overly polite.

As trust develops, members will take more risks, offering ideas and opinions and revealing more of their true selves behind the public image.

How to build trust:

- Teach the gospel of confession and forgiveness (read 1 Jn 1).
- The leader's model will affect the group—remember names; encourage all contributors.
- Discriminate between the value and truthfulness of contributions. Members need to know they can offer any idea, but they will respect the leader and group which makes sincere judgments about its truth or value. People want to know where they stand with each other.
- Appropriate self-disclosure by the leader. Too much too soon will scare people off.
- Establish the ground rule of confidentiality. This will encourage security in self-disclosure.
- Encourage friendships beyond the group time.
- Informality in the group over meals, outings, etc.
- In summary: by proving to be worthy of that trust.

Unresolved conflict

Conflict is a normal part of Growth Groups because it is a normal part of relating in this world. Not only should we expect conflict, we should welcome it. It provides a window of opportunity for the growth of individuals and the group. In resolving conflict, godly attitudes and behaviour are encouraged and there is often a need to repent from sin.

There are different sources of conflict:

- personality clashes
- differing goals and expectations
- differing beliefs and values
- power struggles

People make various responses to conflict and have different ways of handling it:

- denial
- fight to win
- avoid it
- compromise
- capitulate

What should Christians do in conflict situations?

- be willing to face them honestly; it is happening
- look to our own attitudes and sins that may be contributing to the conflict
- admit our anger or frustrations
- confront others with the problems they are causing
- be generous with forgiveness and patience
- look for mutually beneficial solutions
- sometimes back down

The leader

Failure to establish ground rules for group life

Every society has rules of behaviour or laws which are designed to promote the good of the individual and the society as a whole. In little societies like our

Growth Groups, certain patterns of behaviour will be beneficial to achieving the aims of the group. Others will be a hindrance.

Lots of these patterns have been touched on already: listening to all contributions; not interrupting each other; the freedom to disagree with each other; keeping confidences shared in the group; the freedom to ask questions. However, there ought not be too many conscious rules, as this will suffocate the group.

These ground rules are set in two ways:

- Implicitly by the models set by the leader and others.
- Explicitly by discussion and agreement. The Bible itself will shape godly patterns of how others are to be treated.

The ground rules can be enforced in two ways:

- By group pressure. The majority agree that a particular pattern is right and the members find it impossible to resist.
- By the admonition of the leader or other member, privately or in the group.

Imbalance between task and relationship

Some groups are so focused on the job at hand that the members become alienated from each other. In other groups, so much time is spent 'holding each other's hands' that nothing gets done.

We need to stick to our agenda of Bible study, prayer, serving each other and reaching out. If we don't, there will be no growth. But if the group or particular members are unhappy, it is impossible to work through a Bible study or prayer time in a way that benefits the whole group.

Do we always have to complete our planned program for the night? Sometimes, the agenda has to be set aside to deal with issues affecting the group. It may be a matter external to the group, such as a member in grief over a personal tragedy. Or it may be internal to the group, such as hostility between two members.

At other times, the maintenance of relationships is simultaneous with the task.

How can we ensure the relationships are maintained?

- accept people's contributions

- draw others into the discussion
- notice that a member wants to say something
- admit mistakes and seek forgiveness
- clarify differences and reconcile disagreements
- be conscious of which members are focused on the task and which members are sensitive to relationships

The group

The physical environment

Seating arrangements

Seating has a powerful effect on group dynamics. There needs to be eye contact between all members, with all seated at roughly the same level. The seating should not be focused around the leaders. Leaders should sit where they can see people as they arrive. Seats need to be comfortable to avoid distraction: sitting on the floor creates a lethargic mood; sitting around a table creates a study environment.

The position of certain personalities in the group will alter dynamics. A lot of it has to do with eye contact which, in turn, affects participation. Sit dominant members near the leader to minimize eye contact with them. Quieter members should sit opposite the leader to increase eye contact. Quieter members might feel overawed if sitting between two 'bigger' people, either in size or personality.

Acoustics

Eliminate background noise and distractions. Choose a location where all can hear each other without straining. The telephone can be a problem if you are meeting in a busy home.

Lighting

Lighting affects the mood of a group. Soft lighting is more intimate, but difficult for reading. Bright light behind members makes them hard to see and draws them out of the discussion.

Ventilation

Stuffy rooms make for sleepy discussions. The air temperature ought to be comfortable: neither too hot nor too cold.

Events

Things that happen in the group can have a long term effect on its functioning. These may be recent or quite distant events. Suppose one or two members at the first meeting of the group spoke openly about some highly emotive personal issues. The group may remain reserved, not wanting to cope with further outpourings. Then again, it might become normal for people to be emotionally charged when they speak about personal issues.

Structure

There will be a pattern or network of relationships in a group. There may be sub-groups, cliques or power structures, such as a minority group which repeatedly hijacks the discussion. These will all have an effect on the group. Quiet groups may be caused by cliques who do not know or relate to the others.

The leader can set up new structures by varying the format of the discussion: use prayer partners, buzz groups for short discussions, syndicates for research and reporting, debating teams, role plays.

Content

The content or topic of discussion may suppress the group for a variety of reasons. It may be too difficult, beyond their knowledge or experience, too easy and obvious, too intimidating or too repetitive.

Atmosphere or mood

The overall temper of your group will effect things like participation levels. A group might be energetic, sluggish, congenial, argumentative, hardworking or playful.

12.3 DIAGNOSING A SICK GROWTH GROUP

There are three stages in the diagnosis of a group:

1. Make accurate observations

The diagnostic tool above (12.1) provides a 'stethoscope' for assessing the health of a group. You need to get into the habit of using this stethoscope to

diagnose the condition of your group. Use it to make accurate observations of what is happening. Regularly ask yourself and your assistant leaders the diagnostic questions.

Take care when interpreting observations. The same event can have several possible interpretations. For example, two members conducting a private conversation during the discussion could mean they are bored, stimulated, angry or in love!

2. Determine the cause(s) of ill health

Once some unhealthy aspect of group life has been observed, the causes need to be analyzed so that a remedy can be applied. Many common causes of ill health have been canvassed above (12.2). Usually, there is not one isolated cause of ill health, so it is important to consider all possible factors. It always helps to check your diagnosis with your assistant leaders.

3. Apply the remedy

Having made observations of unhealthy aspects of group life and diagnosed probable causes, the final step is to work out what action should be taken to remedy the situation. In some cases, no action is best, either because the problem will correct itself as the group grows in Christ, or because tackling the problem would distract the group from its more central aims of growth. You and the group might decide to live with the problem.

Possible remedies have been suggested above, focussing on the individual, the members, the leader and the group. Some remedies are direct, others more subtle.

12.4 A CASE STUDY

This case study illustrates how to use the diagnostic tool to assess the health of a Growth Group and how to determine the causes of ill-health.

Consider a group of 12 members from the same church, who meet once a week on a Wednesday evening. Few of the members knew each other before joining the group. Their ages range from 19 to 40, all singles.

1. Observations

Using the diagnostic tool, we look carefully at the behaviour of the group.

The group is quiet and not participating well in discussions. This pattern has continued for several weeks, not just in the early stage. They are overly polite and 'nice' to each other, never expressing negative feelings about anything. One member of the group dominates the air time. The group tends to rush through material rather than pursuing in-depth discussion.

2. Possible causes of ill health

Here we consider the possible causes of an unhealthy group mentioned at 12.2.

THE INDIVIDUALS

Three group members are quiet personalities. They seem comfortable; they are just quiet.

THE MEMBERS

Trust and acceptance?

There are low levels of trust evidenced by an avoidance of expressing negative feelings and a lack of in-depth discussion.

Unresolved conflict?

No evidence.

THE LEADER

Failure to establish ground rules for group life?

No, this was done.

Imbalance between task and relationship?

Yes, this is a problem, evidenced by rushing through discussion material.

THE GROUP

The physical environment

The seating at different heights is reducing eye contact.

Events

One member poured out a personal problem on the first night which the group didn't know how to handle. This memory could be an inhibiting factor.

Structure

The group seems to be intimidated by its size.

Content

Not a particular problem, as these studies have worked well in other groups.

Atmosphere or mood

There aren't many outgoing personalities in the group.

3. Apply the remedy

Some causes have no obvious remedy. The three quiet personalities may warm up as time goes on, but they are what they are and need to be accepted. Not everyone is outgoing, nor would we want everyone to be. The personality of group members must become part of the way the group operates.

Other causes suggest their own remedies. A friendship-building activity, like a holiday or helping a member build a garage, should create trust—as long as the garage stays up. Acquiring more chairs would fix the seating problem. You could review the ground rule of the freedom to express strong feelings and discuss the event which occurred on the first night. Breaking the group into smaller units of three or four for some exercises, and having these groups report back to the big group, may free up discussion.