

Christian Leadership 3 – Week 8

Ideas for Leading a Cell Group

I. Description

Xenos leaders usually approach the task of discipleship in the home group through a combination of one-on-one mentoring, and small, same-sexed study groups called “cell groups” or men’s or women’s study groups. Xenos cell groups are different than cell groups in other churches. In most churches, cell groups are the basic home-based group in the church. But in Xenos, the main home group is the home church, and cell groups are smaller, single-sexed groups. This pattern is similar to that used in the early Wesleyan movement, where they held societies, classes, and bands. The bands were single-gender small groups for discipleship.

Cell groups serve a combined role of friendship building, mutual support and training, or discipleship. For all these roles, the groups need to be small. Three to eight people is best, although some are getting good results with larger groups, especially when practicing team leadership. Student cells are commonly larger than adult cells. By approaching discipleship through cell groups, we believe we can maximize group, or community, discipleship, thus bringing in dynamics not found in traditional one-on-one discipleship. Most leaders also engage in one-on-one work with key members of their cell groups.

II. Composition

At Xenos, most of our meetings are open to non-Christians, so we feel that cell groups should be reserved for believers.

If you do initiate an uncommitted group, you should not later change it to a committed group unless all of the members explicitly agree to such a change from the heart. In other words, to change the rules for a group after recruiting people with a different understanding is like changing the rules in the middle of the game.

Things cell groups accomplish include:

1. Winning new Christians into their membership
2. Caring for the weak members of the group
3. Teaching its members basic Christian living and worldview (grounding in the Word)
4. Providing members help and opportunity to build relationships with each other
5. Providing rudimentary counseling and guidance in Christian living as needed; praying for each other’s problems
6. Providing motivation and creating vision in the minds of the members for serving Christ
7. Helping each member to develop their own ministry, including, for most, winning their own disciples. Young Christians can get supervised experience serving others, as well as coaching on sharing the gospel, and responding to challenges to their faith, and other ministry opportunities. They get to watch older believers minister to issues, and can benefit from the modeling.
8. Ultimately, you are training new leaders for the home church

III. Tactical Considerations

Don’t overlook the importance of a good meeting place and good atmosphere for your meetings. These are especially important for new members. When people come to a group they are impacted by the over-all experience, not just by the teaching etc.

The Meeting Place

1. Consider holding cell around a table. This setting provides for maximum concentration and direct involvement by all. It may be necessary to obtain or build a large table, or to pull tables together beforehand.

If you decide to hold your meeting in couches, make sure they aren't too far apart. People usually need to be facing each other and close together in order to feel engaged during a discussion.
2. Crowding is not a bad thing in a cell group, but disengagement is a clear danger, and will cause the cell group to become a Bible club rather than a gathering of close friends.
3. The meeting place should be air conditioned in the summer, and not too warm in the winter. Warm temperatures lead to drowsiness.
4. Be sure to have coffee ready before the meeting. Cell members who have a coffee will likely be more attentive and less drowsy.
5. Allow half an hour for talking and warm up before gathering the group together. Most successful groups periodically schedule activities together before the meeting like cookouts, dinner at a restaurant, or a special treat. These activities can be significant in building a sense of community in the group.

During the meeting

1. Cell meetings should be held at a time when members can put together 2-4 hours. For most groups in Xenos today, this means cell groups meet on weekend evenings, especially Friday nights.
2. Go ahead with the meeting even if some are absent at first. The others will come when they hear that a good thing is going on. Starting late teaches members to be late.
3. Cell groups should include both instruction and interaction.
 - a) During periods of instruction, be sure to keep it interesting. Just because the group is small doesn't mean you don't have to be fiery, upbeat, funny, and challenging. The cell leader may need to stand periodically and walk around in order to hold attention.
 - b) During interactive periods, the leader needs to guide discussion while not discouraging creative sharing. Cell groups should not be held to a rigid outline. Invite interruptions.

Alternate between short periods of teaching and discussion. This is called leader-guided or moderated group discussion. While you can expect some peer-to-peer interaction, most of the interaction will be from learners to the leader or the group in general.

The leader offers a short summary and comment to most, or all, sharing. These summaries should crystallize what was said, and stimulate further thinking. [see an expanded coverage of this material in the class outlines for Leading Guided Discussion]

- c) The leader will normally introduce "probes" or questions intended to prod members toward a particular line of thought.

However, discussion is not recitation. Recitation is when the instructor gives students an opportunity to clarify content or asks questions requiring specific knowledge of study content, frequently from assigned readings (like the teacher in "The Paper Chase").

We are not suggesting such recitation is wrong or harmful, and in fact, cell group is one venue where a measured amount of recitation may be helpful. For instance, members can review findings from previous weeks which can lead to better retention.

However, be aware that recitation can be intimidating to new members. Read the situation.

Creative discussion focuses not on specific answers the leader wants to hear, but on questions of *interpretation, opinion, and experience*.

The following are types of probes suggested in this author's class on guided discussion:

- o Set up an apparent contradiction in your introduction, and ask the group how it might be resolved
 - o Ask them how a particular truth might apply either to life in general, or to specific situations you imagine
 - o Give them a statement from a third party (either imaginary or an authority) and ask them to react to it
 - o Ask how someone from x, y, or z perspective would answer a particular question
 - o Set up a real life situation (where principles often don't apply neatly) and ask how the principle might apply in that situation. Ask for exceptions.
 - o Ask if what you just distilled from a text or narrative is different or the same as something else with which they are already familiar (e.g. Is this teaching about letting each person have their own conviction from Rom. 14 different in any way from relativism?)
 - o Devil's advocacy: challenge a position they all seem to accept axiomatically with some problems
 - o Discovery: What do you think this passage is really saying?
 - o Personal experience: Who wants to share an experience where this truth has made a difference?
 - o Comparing and contrasting: Asking members to compare and contrast concepts, theories, and individuals helps to clarify the relationships within a content area.
- d) To enhance your discussion-leading ability, consider taking the Xenos course in "Teaching Through Guided Discussion."
4. Cell leaders should not fail to get into Scripture or related content. Some discussions deteriorate into attention-getting, or become so opinionated that the group never gets into its intended study. The take-home value of these discussions is often not sufficient to build members up, *even though they may report enjoying it.*
- Experience shows that groups where leaders fail to focus on Scripture and learning at least for a good part of the evening tend to lose members' interest.
- If members have counseling needs, they may have to wait until after the time in the Bible. In some cases, they could wait until after the group breaks up.
5. When teaching basic truths for the sake of the new members, remind the older members that they will probably want to be able to repeat the material soon in their own cell groups, and should therefore be interested for different reasons.
6. Avoid going too long on the meeting. Although cell groups can go longer than normal large meetings, set your goal at no more than an hour and a half.

Cell Group Prayer

These days, most groups devote time before cell for prayer. Corporate prayer is one of the most important opportunities in a cell group.

1. Prayer should be real and edifying. Paul says "Let everything be done for edification." (That is, for edification of others. I Cor. 14:26).
2. Don't confuse good prayer with long prayer. Some older members may want to pray long prayers that are boring to newer members, and may even be attention-getting. In any event, such long or theological prayers are insensitive and they intimidate new members.

3. Teach your members to affirm one another's prayers verbally as described in I Cor. 14:16. Verbal affirmation leads to a feeling of participation which encourages prayer.
4. Be sure to focus early in your prayer time on thanksgiving and praise. Avoid excessive negativity during prayer times.

Answered prayers should always be pointed out to the group, with reminders that praying makes a difference.

Read the situation:

If people are interested in praying, let them pray. But if the meeting has gone too long and people are sluggish about prayer, you may want to bring it to a close before creating a negative association in the minds of members.

After the meeting

Much of the best ministry in a cell group occurs after the meeting. Work to build a consensus that the time after the meeting is the best part of the evening. These times serve to transform the group into a community, rather than simply a class.

1. Leaders should strenuously avoid leaving soon after the meeting, as this communicates either disinterest, or at least, low priority on spending time with members of the group. Only on rare occasions should leaders leave immediately, and then only with apologies.
2. Avoid simply ending the meeting and continuing to sit around your table chatting. Unless the group moves to another area, it will seem like the meeting is lasting for 6 hours. Consider adjourning to a fire, a deck, or other conversational setting with low lighting after the meeting.
3. You, as leader should show the way into good recreation and relaxation, including all of the things normally associated with those states (humor, reminiscence, talk of the opposite sex, sports, etc.). This amounts to a demonstration of Christian liberty in the context of Christian love. As such, it carries an important message to the others. Opportunities will often arise to model during this time.

The ability to relax and talk in a humorous vein, or to share insightful thoughts about secular matters is essential during this period. While going out to a movie or playing games is sometimes good, the most ideal activities are those which accommodate conversation. This is your chance to have good talks with your cell members.

Your basis for effective ministry is your ability to develop love relationships with your cell group. Memorable shared experiences and talking to each other is lead to relationship building. Routine TV watching or card playing are much less suitable to this task.

4. Cell leaders have to balance time between making sure that no one is being ignored, and engaging one or more members in a relatively deep conversation. Hopefully others in the group spontaneously join in meeting needs during this period, but if not, they may need some one-on-one training.

As time goes on, cell group weekends are a good idea. Again, we are trying to provide for the development of unity and identity within the cell group.

Be affectionate and loyal to your people. Anyone who can lead an effective cell group has most of the basic skills needed to lead a Home Church.

IV. Members' Spiritual Condition

Good cell leaders are constantly watching and praying for their members. Leaders need to assess:

1. Evidence of closeness in relationships. Are the members associating at times other than regular meetings? Do they enjoy each other? Are they concerned about each others' lives? Or are they disengaged?
2. Notice how long people tend to stay afterward. If your cell group clears out soon after the meeting this suggests low morale and low cohesiveness.

V. Planting the New Cell Group

Be sure to work well ahead of time with your fellow leaders in the home church when planning the new cell group plant.

Your other home church leaders must agree on who the leaders of the new group will be, and on the membership of both groups. How you plant your cell bears directly on how the home church will later be planted. These are legitimate concerns for the entire home group, and group discernment should bear out any impressions you already have. Read the paper, *Leading Home Church Growth* for ideas on how to work with your fellow leaders in this area of planning.

A few basic considerations:

1. Each new cell group should have possible future leaders, as well as those with outreach potential. In other words, the cell should have both high end and low end potential.
2. Student groups that have ministry houses should align their ministry houses with their cell groups.
3. A group of fewer than five members risks having weeks when one or two fail to show up, and the group feels depressed about having only two or three present.

Building and planting a cell group is one of the most difficult and rewarding ministries a person can have. When we do this work well, we have built a solid foundation for a new home church. We have also built quality into the home church for years to come. Our best leaders can build and plant cell groups every two to three years, but even four, five, or six years would not be out of the question for accomplishing a ministry of this scope and difficulty.