

HOMEGROUPS: The Authentic Guide

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Sample Chapter

OVERSEEING YOUR HOMEGROUP

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5.1 Spread the joy and the load

The quickest way to burn out as a leader is by falsely believing it is your responsibility, alone, to take on all the needs of the group, particularly practical requests. You are not a sponge with a limitless capacity to absorb. Unsurprisingly, there are some people who have a misconception of the role of a homegroup leader and see you as their 'Jim'll fix it.' Inevitably, there are always a few individuals who have selective understanding of what is meant by 'reasonable' and 'fair' and sometimes you will have to say 'Sorry I can't help.' You don't have to respond favourably to every request for help; each situation should be assessed as to whether it is reasonable and your responsibility.

On one occasion, I was leading a study from Acts 2 on how the early Christians helped and supported one another. I closed by saying if there was anything I could do to help anyone in the homegroup, they should not hesitate to ask. These seemed to be the appropriate words to say at the time but once spoken, I immediately forgot them. A few days later, Mary shared with me how much she had enjoyed the Bible study and asked whether I had really meant what I said about helping? Without taking a breath and before I could reply, she then asked if I could decorate her lounge. Somewhat taken aback by her request I fumbled for a quick, stalling reply. 'Mary, I need to think about it and get back to you.' No, I didn't decorate Mary's room. In fact, I had to be honest and tell her I was unable to help on this. I felt bad about it but I had neither the time nor the necessary skills to carry out the work.

I learnt some principles worth noting from this experience. Firstly, if what has been asked is impossible or impractical, do not feel guilty about having to say you're sorry that you are unable to help. (This is something I am still trying to master!) Secondly, if the request is unreasonable, then you should not expect anyone else to take it on. Lastly, if what has been asked does warrant help but you can't give that help, there may be someone else in the group who can. I believe leaders have to share the load. As for Mary, a friend came to my rescue and decorated her lounge.

5.2 Confidentiality

I was invited to attend a homegroup which was going to be discussing whether or not they should divide. They had a real logistical problem. Just how many people can you squeeze into a small room? I joined in the Bible study, sitting on the second step of the stairs, as there was literally no room in the lounge. When the topic of

dividing the group was raised, the conversation was fast and furious. No one disagreed with the idea in principle but the thought of change was not easy to accept. The tension was eased by a humorous comment: 'Why would you want to split the group now? We have just reached the point where we can be rude to one another and still go home friends!' Reflecting upon the evening as I was driving home, I understood why there was a reluctance to divide. This was a caring group where trust had been established and sensitive topics could be discussed, with the knowledge that confidences would be respected.

Homegroups need to be places where everyone can feel secure enough to open up their lives to one another, without the concern that what has been shared will become gossip. It takes a great deal of courage and trust to share a personal and painful experience. How many people have stopped attending a homegroup because sensitive issues have been handled badly and confidences broken? If you are to encourage sharing, you have to take on the responsibility of keeping what has been said within the 'four walls' of the homegroup, even if no formal request for confidentiality has been made.

At a homegroup I recently attended, one of the group shared that twenty years ago he had had a drinking problem. This was not to draw attention to himself but to help another member in the group put a similar problem into perspective. It was one of those 'silent moments' as everyone listened to Dave, sharing from the heart his battle to overcome alcoholism. It was evident he was fighting to hold back the tears and was embarrassed by what he was saying. At no time did he ask that this should be kept in confidence but I believe all of us understood this was a private moment. What would be gained if we shared this story with someone else in the church? Would it help to build them up spiritually or would we simply be gossiping, betraying someone's unspoken trust in us to keep a confidence?

There are three types of confidentiality:

- An open secret.
- Shared in confidence.
- For your ears only.

An open secret

This is a personal matter that is openly shared within the homegroup. Although there has been no request to keep it in confidence, there is nothing to be gained by passing the information on.

Shared in confidence

This is a personal matter that is openly shared within the homegroup, on the understanding that it will be kept confidential. Trust takes a long time to build but can be destroyed in minutes by breaking a confidence through gossip.

For your ears only

This is a situation or problem that is shared only with you as a homegroup leader. Someone takes you into their confidence and requests guidance and prayer support.

It is possible that a confidence shared with you has ramifications beyond your responsibility or experience, yet the information cannot be ignored. My advice is as follows:

- Before promising to uphold the confidence, it is wise to explain that you cannot keep what they are about to share private if the confidence is about something illegal or involves harming themselves or others (especially if it means a child could be at risk¹). Your church should have a child protection policy with which you are familiar.
- Do not get more deeply involved than your knowledge and ability on the issue allows.
- Avoid getting over-involved emotionally.
- Recommend they talk to someone who can deal with their problem professionally – either spiritually, medically or legally.
- You should seek their approval before speaking to your church leader about what has been shared.
- Do not assume that what you are being told is the whole story; you may only be getting one side.
- You are there as a friend and homegroup leader, know your boundaries and how far you are willing to go to support them.
- Do not be judgemental.

Just a thought

We have all said things we regret, made loose remarks or betrayed someone who trusted us to keep a confidence. How easily we slip into idle gossip that edifies no one! Who of us does not have, etched in our memories, conversations that we wish could be rewound and erased? One such occasion was when Mandy and I were in an Indian restaurant enjoying a meal with friends. We were deep in conversation about a young couple whose marriage had just broken up, when a diner from a nearby table came across and said, 'That's my brother and his wife you are talking about.' I cannot recall if we had said anything that was untrue, probably not, but that is not the issue. The fact is we were trivialising a situation that deeply affected his family. Regrettably, I probably still do enter into foolish conversation and gossip. However, that night in the Indian restaurant now serves as a constant reminder to put into practice the wise words of the apostle James,

We all make many mistakes, but those who control their tongues can also control themselves in every other way (James 3:2).

We do not believe there is a confidentiality scale. There is no category that carries the disclaimer, 'I know I was told in confidence but I am sure they won't mind if I tell you.' As Christians, it is important that we are true to our word. Never underestimate just how damaging unguarded words can be, either in conversations or when we publicly pray aloud. Perhaps something we should add to our 'To Do' list as homegroup leaders is: Think before we speak.

5.3 Effective listening

Rarely does a week go by without Colin phoning me for a chat. He phones to bring me up to date with what has happened to him during the past week. This invariably turns out to be the same as the previous week. Why does he phone? Is there more behind his telephone call than just passing on his latest news? In a word, 'Yes.' Colin feels at ease sharing with me the everyday happenings of his life, not because I need to know, but rather because I listen to what he has to say with interest. Never

¹For further information on child protection policies, go to www.ccpas.co.uk

overlook the significance of being willing to listen to someone. Anne Long, in the introduction to her book *Listening*² says

It sounds simple and sometimes is, yet there is more to listening than meets the eye. If some of the qualities needed in a good listener come naturally, others do not and need to be learnt and worked at. Even the born listener can refine and improve his gift so that it becomes a deeper, richer ministry. For listening is a multi-dimensional activity. Hearing the words that someone speaks is to receive only one aspect of his communication. There are also other levels which need to be heard and understood – his style of speaking, his feelings, thinking, attitudes, body, silence. All these are dimensions of the person which we must learn to hear if we are to understand him.

There are probably many reasons why a person is a good listener or not. Are some people born better listeners than others? This is probably true, but it can also be true that we are too busy being busy to have time to listen. We can all improve our listening skills by putting into practice a few simple disciplines.

Listen to content not delivery

Not everyone has the gift of expressing themselves easily. Some may even be boring to listen to, or may have facial mannerisms that distract you. Remember to concentrate on the content of what is being said, rather than on the quality of delivery.

Maintain eye contact

Good listening is more than hearing the words; body language also plays a part. It is important to maintain good eye contact with the person speaking. It reaffirms that you are listening.

Avoid too much emotional involvement

Try not to become too emotionally involved as it will stop you being able to listen objectively and rationally. If what has been said causes you distress (and this is inevitable at times) you will need to have someone who you can turn to for support. (See 12.2: What is a homegroup pastor?).

Avoid distractions

Concentrate both on the person and what they are saying. Try to avoid becoming distracted by what is going on around you or your own thoughts.

Don't interrupt

Ask questions to help with your understanding but don't try and take the conversation back. Remember you are doing the listening, not the talking.

Listen with sympathy

Try to sympathise with what the speaker is saying. It may not resonate with you but that should not stop you from listening with empathy.

Show respect

Not everyone has sparkling conversation but everyone deserves to be listened to with respect.

²Anne Long, *Listening*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990)

Just a thought

Mike was the ideal person to lead the homegroup training. Perhaps being a policeman gave him an advantage in knowing how to teach listening skills. His presentation style was engaging and it did not take long before everyone was relaxed and laughing as he used amusing illustrations to bring his points across. Nothing that he said was startlingly new to me: over the years, I have both attended and led seminars on listening skills. Nevertheless, what he said was a wake-up call for me to re-evaluate whether or not, in practice, I am a good listener. As a homegroup leader, you should not undervalue the importance of listening and we would encourage you to read up on how to be an effective listener. It is one thing to know about the techniques for effective listening but putting them into practice is altogether different.

5.4 Sharing

I regret that I had few meaningful conversations with my father. Sadly, he died several years ago. He was a quiet, unassuming and private man who rarely expressed his true feelings. We would talk about the soccer results or how the slugs had attacked his cabbages, pretending that the issues affecting our family had never occurred. My father was from a culture and generation that kept their emotions private; the word 'sharing' was not in their vocabulary. Sharing our thoughts and feelings with one another is probably something we do more naturally in today's society, although for many men the conversation still does not go beyond soccer, DIY and gardening. Sharing within the homegroup is a privilege, not a right. We should have the discernment to know when it is appropriate to encourage sharing; ensuring that what is being said is beneficial both for the group and the individual who is sharing. Sharing can be defined in the following ways:

Common knowledge: the sharing of general information that everyone would appreciate or benefit from knowing. Example: 'Mrs Jones' funeral will take place at the church at 2.00 pm on Wednesday.'

Just the facts – The sharing of personal factual information that is not sensitive or embarrassing. Example: 'Please pray for me as I am going into hospital for a minor knee operation.'

Personal – The sharing of the sort of intimate, personal feelings that are difficult to talk about. Example: 'A few years ago I had an affair that nearly wrecked my marriage.'

Useful guidelines for sharing

Lead from the front

Be prepared to take the lead. The amount of personal information you share will probably set the level within the group. Set boundaries so everyone understands what degree of sharing is acceptable.

Know when is it unwise to share

There are some things that may be unwise or unhelpful to share within the homegroup. Too much personal information may not be helpful to everyone in the group and some things are best shared one on one.

Don't run before you can walk

Usually people are reluctant to share personal issues until they feel secure. Encourage people to share at the common knowledge level, until they feel comfortable trusting the group with more personal information.

Be yourself

Sharing has to be normal, natural and honest. We should not look to shock or embarrass each other.

Don't judge

Acknowledge what has been shared with love and acceptance, without being judgemental.

You don't have to share something!

Not everyone will feel at ease sharing. You should not make sharing a compulsory part of the homegroup.

Sharing is not gossiping

Sharing and gossiping are not the same, make sure you are sharing and not gossiping. Gossiping is passing on information that you don't need to talk about and the other person doesn't need to know. Sharing is talking about issues that you both do need to know about.

Can I trust you?

To share personal and intimate details takes courage. Both leaders and homegroup members need to treat what has been said in confidence and respect the honesty and bravery of the person who has shared.

Just a thought

A few years ago, a TV commercial for British Telecom had as its slogan, 'It's Good to Talk.' Their intention may have been to encourage us to spend more time on the telephone for the benefit of their shareholders. Nevertheless, there is a truth behind the message: it is important that we talk to each other and have people we can confide in.

5.5 Dealing with criticism

Criticism will come in all shapes and sizes, from someone questioning what you are doing to comments on how you are handling a situation. You cannot escape or cocoon yourself from criticism and at some time you will probably be affected by hurtful remarks, made to or about you. The question is; how do you handle them? Do you become angry or do they make you want to give up? Don't be too hard on yourself. Don't set yourself impossibly high standards – you cannot meet the needs of all the people all of the time. Even with the best intentions, it is possible you will let someone down. You have to accept that some people's expectations of you are unrealistic. There will be those who never stop thanking you for all you do, even to a point of embarrassment. On the other hand there may be someone who has exactly the opposite opinion and is judgemental. This is more than hurtful; it also undermines your leadership.

How then should you deal with criticism? If you are non-confrontational, your immediate inclination will probably be to avoid speaking directly to the person in the hope the problem will just go away. This is not necessarily wrong, as the person may be going through a difficult period in their life and you just happen to be in the firing

line. All they need is some time and space. However, if the situation continues, it does need to be dealt with because their attitude may have an adverse affect upon the other members of the group. An attempt needs to be made to restore harmony. It will not be easy but it is necessary for you to speak with the person regarding your concerns, with the aim of resolving the problem. It may be the case that there is a misunderstanding that is causing the rift and merely by talking one-on-one it can be rectified. If this does not sort the situation out it may be advisable for the person to move to an alternative homegroup. This may well be a positive move for everyone and should not be considered as a failure on your part. Unless you are made of rubber and everything bounces off you, even the mildest of criticism will hurt. Part of your responsibility as a leader is to know how to handle it. The following may prove helpful when dealing with criticism:

Listen

When you are criticised, possibly the hardest thing to do is to listen. Your natural reaction is to defend yourself. Try and listen and understand the other person's viewpoint.

Evaluate

Is there justification in what is being said? Are you confusing criticisms with helpful advice? It may be what has been shared is for your benefit. You should ask yourself if there is something positive you could do to improve or rectify the situation.

Share

There may be occasions when it is necessary to share what has been said with someone you trust and respect for their advice. This is not to seek an ally for your corner but to help you evaluate what has been said and to keep things in perspective.

Respond

If you acknowledge that the criticism is justified, it will require action to be taken on your part to improve the situation. Alternatively, you may have to confront the person who raised the criticism to explain why you feel their comments were unjustified.

Move on

Receiving criticism from time to time does not necessarily do any harm. It may even help to improve you as a leader and to keep your feet on the ground. You need to learn to handle criticism with maturity, when it has been shared to build you up rather than knock you down, respecting those who have taken courage to speak out. When criticism has been shared unjustifiably, do not allow the anger or hurt to linger. We have all spoken words that we regret. The best advice, from my own experience, is to move on.

5.6 Highs and lows

How easy it is to become discouraged, feeling unappreciated and taken for granted. Do you ever doubt your ability or calling from God? Is now the right time to take a rest from running the homegroup? Are there occasions when you simply have to just 'hang in there', even if it feels like you are climbing a mountain, struggling to find a foothold, longing to reach the peak? Many of us will identify with the emotional highs and lows of leadership.

If we have painted a picture of homegroup leadership being ninety percent dangling from the end of a rope and only ten percent being on top of the mountain, then we apologise: this couldn't be further from the truth. Imagine the exhilaration a mountaineer experiences on reaching the summit. Gone are the thoughts of giving up and turning back. For the majority of the time leadership is a pleasure but just like the mountaineer, we need to be well prepared for those 'challenging' climbs. Don't forget God's calling on your life and remember the Sun shines at the top of the mountain. Hang in there!

'God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have the gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly' (Rom. 12:6-8)

5.7 In a nutshell

- A good leader is one who knows when and how to spread the joy and the load. Do not be a sponge and soak up all the responsibility.
- Homegroups need to be a place where trust has been established and confidences respected.
- Being a good listener is as important as being an accomplished speaker.
- Sharing and gossiping are not the same, make sure you are sharing and not gossiping.
- Handle criticism wisely, learn from it and move on.