**Supporting small group leaders**

We all need others to help us to do well and thrive. This is certainly true when it comes to leading a small group. It is a fact that many small group leaders feel unsupported and often describe what they do in leading a small group as unappreciated by the larger church and sadly sometimes the central church leadership.

Small groups are often the hidden engine of the church, helping their members grow and develop behind the scenes and enabling to live effectively for Jesus in every area of their lives. The small group leaders may not get the support and focus of central leadership that more public areas of church life receive. So we have to think about giving this area our attention along with other aspects and ensure that the leaders are equipped and supported so they and their groups can thrive and flourish.

**So what will help?**

We need to recognise that this idea of supporting small group leaders has not been part of our thinking in some churches so patterns and ideas around this will be new to some. With this in mind it is important that we understand not only how this might work but why it is important.

Keeping the groups linked to the life of the larger church

Bill Beckham writing about small groups in church life describes the small groups as one wing of the churches life. The other wing being the Sunday meetings and corporate activities of the church. This gives a picture of a bird that can fly with two wings in motion together. The two wings need to be joined together to work effectively and enable flight. There is a danger that these two wings get separated and can even appear in competition with each other. With this in mind we need to look at how they can remain connected and indeed what connects them?

One of the connections from the small groups to the larger body of the church is that the Bible section of the small group is based on the Sunday teaching from the main church. This keeps things on track and encourages the groups to be working with the same issues that arise from the content of Sundays and in doing so provides cohesion across the life of the church as a whole. The idea here is not that the sermon is re preached in each group but that the content is explored and most importantly applied to our lives. The steps to make this happen are outlined in Help I am leading my small group.

**Coaching**

A second connection often comes in the form of a coach or support person for the group and its leader. This can happen in a number of ways so we will explore a few here and you can work with whatever suits your situation or is appropriate in your particular church culture.

Relationship vs role

One of the keys to supporting small group leaders is developing a coaching and supportive relationship, this comes out of having the role of being a coach for them but that is not the overriding driver. You need to be in this as a friend and confidant not just because you have signed up to take on the role. With this in mind here are a few areas to look at as you meet up, I can work with three things in my head so I tend to work around just three areas to keep it simple.

**The first** is how are they doing in the whole of life? So asking about work and family time commitments etc and their general wellbeing as you would with any good friendship. This starts you off on the right foot as far as putting relationship above role is concerned. Working in this way values the person you are meeting with as a whole person rather than just as a volunteer in a role. For me this sits comfortably with the New Testaments emphasis on us being in relationships that are described in terms of family, using the language of Brother and Sister.

**Secondly** it is good to talk about spiritual life and ask how they are connecting with God. It is vital that those who are leading our small groups have a dynamic and living relationship with Jesus. This is not to say that everything has to be sorted in this respect as we all have seasons in our lives where our relationship with God is not as buoyant as we would like it to be. A pattern of personal prayer and Bible study should be part of a small group leader’s diet to enable them to lead out of a place of connection with God. This will vary in style and frequency with each person but is an area that is often not talked about and kept private, so to initiate conversations around it in a supportive way is essential. Using open questions is helpful in this area, so “how would you describe your relationship with God at the moment” may be a good starter. As with any relationship it is imperative that we listen actively and give time to allow them to answer as fully as possible.

**Thirdly,** we need to focus on the group they are leading. We can do this in a number of ways. Firstly in general about how the group is working in terms of personalities and any issues that may arise from group dynamics. Also how individuals are developing in themselves and anything of concern to the leader about specific situations that have arisen (we will talk more about this in a later section). Another area we will want to explore is areas where there leadership might be developed. This can be ascertained through gentle questioning around areas that are working well and those that are perhaps a bit of a struggle. For instance, some small group leaders find it challenging to give parts of the meeting away to group members and need to be encouraged to take risks in this area and not hold on to their leadership too tightly. This may come to light as they describe that they are overwhelmed with making everything happen and preparing the meeting takes so much of their time. Some leaders struggle with the organisational side of the group and getting to grips with the details of who is going to do what when, many groups have one of the members act as an organiser which is their strength and enables them to make a contribution to the group out of their gifting.

This highlights another area that it is worth mentioning at this point, which is that having a core group within each small group is often helpful. This is simply two or three of the group who are on page with you and can be relied on to help make it work. Identifying these individuals and helping the leaders to work with them in an informal way really helps to share the leadership.

A vital part of the role of a coach is to provide support for the leaders of the group. This can come in different ways at different times across the lifespan of the group.

At the beginning, as the group leadership is finding its way and the group is settling in and getting to know one another it is important to help those leading to feel confident in what they have undertaken and to assure them that you are available to chat and pray if necessary.

As the group moves on things settle in a bit and a rhythm and pattern is established for the group, people start to get to know each other. There is a need to start asking slightly more in depth questions and learning to trust each other. This takes the group forward and the group leadership needs to sense that this need to happen and step out and indeed take a lead with this. This can make them feel quite vulnerable and can be a bit unsettling for the group. In this space it is good to spend time alongside the leaders encouraging them to stay in the reality of this and not settle for surface relationships but continue to build the community of the group by going deeper in the relationships.

Another dimension of this shift to more reality in the group is sometimes a testing of the leadership, challenges are brought by some of the members to see if the leadership is really up to the job! This quite naturally unsettles the leaders and they need support and encouragement through this. This is particularly true where a new way of running the group is being tried, or there is an expectancy that this group will have different outcomes or be run out of different values to previous groups. Explanation here is really helpful as understanding that this sort of thing is part of the development of group life depersonalises it to a degree. All this means spending time with the leaders through the process. Walking together has more detailed discussions around how we can support each other and brings some practical tools to help us.

**Challenging situations**

Many small groups struggle because they have challenging situations that revolve around particular individuals either on an ongoing basis or for a particular season of an individual’s life. We all have challenging moments in our lives often when pain on one form or another comes and knocks on our door.

Small groups are very good at supporting individuals through these seasons with not only prayer but often practical help as well. Where the groups have the sort of atmospheres that we described earlier of honesty and participation then things are more likely to come too light, and we need to be prepared to work with what comes up.

However, we need to recognise that in some situations people need more support than the group can offer. This is particularly true where a situation is ongoing and sometimes true where a crisis has emerged that needs shorter term input of a more professional nature. Where this is the case a pathway needs to be in place so the small group leader can talk to a member of the central leadership team about their concerns and referral can be offered to an appropriate agency. In less demanding situations, some support from a member of the church outside of the small group can be offered. In either situation it is helpful that action is taken as soon as a situation is recognised, both for the sake of the individual and to ensure that the group does not become over burdened trying to offer ongoing support.

Each Church will differ in response to these situations and have particular systems in place to enable discipleship and pastoral care, the key here is to be clear about how this works and who needs to be involved. In most situations the earlier something is highlighted the better. For more thinking around this area see Equipped to Supervise one of our resource booklets.

**Being part of a team**

It is important for many small group leaders to know that they are part of a team of other leaders who are also running small groups. This gives a sense of shared ownership of this part of the church’s life and stops those leading feeling as if they are out there doing it alone. To this end there are a number of things that can create this sense of team. Here are a few that you may like to consider:

Gather small group leaders for ongoing training, this can be in your own setting or indeed joining the regular training sessions run by Cell UK. Topics to look at can be sought from the leaders themselves if you are planning to run the training yourself as they often have an idea of where they would appreciate more input.

Gather small group leaders for feedback and prayer. A number of churches do this on a Sunday evening or over a Saturday morning breakfast. This often involves hearing from each group about how the last few weeks have been. It is a good place to feed back on how the Sunday morning teaching has been applied in the groups and issues that have come up that may need addressing in a future teaching series. It is a good place to hear how other groups are doing and share good practice and ideas that have worked well in other groups whether they be around worship, outreach etc. This cross pollination builds quite a strong sense of team amongst the leaders as they encourage and support each other in sharing ideas.

An away day or weekend, this can have a mixture of content covering such areas as worshipping and praying together, having some teaching input and time for revitalisation and refreshment. Giving space for conversations and fun activities together, out for a walk, a few board games a creative activity etc. All this builds team and gives a context for support and relationships to develop.

Involving this group in the decision making process of the life of the church. Some Churches see their small group leaders as part of an extended leadership team. This often happens in an informal way but is invaluable as this group of leaders are often in touch with insights and feelings of the members of their groups that are helpful to bring to the table. Also these leaders can carry a sense of vision from the centre of the church into their small groups so a two way flow can happen here.