

Practical Ministry Skills: Foundations of a Small-Group Leader



Contents	PAGE
How to Use This Resource <i>by Sam O'Neal</i>	2–3
<i>Note: All of the articles in this section were originally written by Heather Zempel for National Community Church.</i>	
What Group Leaders Are Made Of	
THE CHARACTER OF A GROUP LEADER	4–5
THE ANOINTING OF A GROUP LEADER	6–7
THE DOCTRINE OF A GROUP LEADER	8–9
THE HUMILITY OF A GROUP LEADER.....	10–11
THE ENDURANCE OF A GROUP LEADER.....	12–13
What Group Leaders Do	
THE PRAYER LIFE OF A GROUP LEADER.....	14–15
THE TIME OF A GROUP LEADER	16–17
THE DECISIONS OF A GROUP LEADER.....	18–19
THE GROWTH OF A GROUP LEADER	20–21
THE FRIENDS OF A GROUP LEADER	22–23
FINAL REFLECTIONS.....	24–25
Resources	
FURTHER EXPLORATION.....	26

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER**How to Use This Resource**

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

By Sam O'Neal

There is no such thing as the “prototypical small-group leader.” Anyone who has spent any amount of time in community ministry understands that effective small-group leaders can be men or women, young people or old people, singles or couples. Group leaders can be shy, or they can be bold. They can be Type A or Type B. They can be just about anything.

This is a good thing, of course—there should be no room for discrimination in the church in any fashion. However, it also presents a challenge for churches trying to identify and train new small-group leaders. After all, if anyone has the potential to become a leader, how do you identify the people who are ready to take the next step? And if there is no ideal small-group leader, no standard, what can you point to as a goal when it comes to training new leaders?

As I see it, there are two things that churches can focus on in order to find and train new group leaders. The first is the duties of a typical small-group leader. Even though group leaders come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities, the role they fill stays pretty constant. Fortunately, basic training and orientation in the duties of a small-group leader is the focus of the most popular resource on SmallGroups.com: the [Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide](#). This has been an invaluable resource for many churches, helping them identify and train group leaders based on the tasks they will need to complete.

“Foundations of a Group Leader” focuses on the second element: the characteristics and habits of an effective small-group leader. This resource highlights the different elements that make up the foundation of a group leader’s life and ministry—things like character, doctrine, decisions, growth, and more.

Target Audience

This resource has been designed primarily for current and potential small-group leaders. The principles and practical ideas found here can help group leaders lay and maintain a solid foundation for their ministry. They can help group leaders identify areas of strength, as well as areas where growth is needed.

If you are a pastor or director of the small-groups ministry at your church, this resource can be a great tool for you, as well. As mentioned above, the foundations discussed in this download can provide you with some landmarks for identifying potential group leaders. For example, if you come across a woman with humility who manages her time well, you should flag her as a possible group leader.

The articles in this download are also a great way to train your current group leaders. A word of caution here: you will get the least benefit from this download if you simply e-mail it to your group leaders and say, “Read this.” As valuable as I believe this content to be, it does not take the place of a working relationship between the group leader and the church. So, the best way to use this material to help train your group leaders is to e-mail it to them and say, “Read this, then let’s get together and talk about what you learn.”

What Group Leaders Are Made Of

The first section of this training download focuses on the inside of an effective small-group leader. It helps paint a picture of the inner foundation that a solid ministry is built on. Some elements of this foundation include Character (p. 4–5), Doctrine (p. 8–9), Humility (p. 10–11), and more.

The best way to make use of the information in these articles is to read them in light of your own strengths and weaknesses. You may read through the article on Endurance (p. 12–13) and say, “I didn’t really learn anything here.” And that’s okay. You can make a mental note that endurance in running the race of life is a strength for you—and that’s a pretty good thing to know!

But you may also read the article on Anointing and say, “Wow, I had no idea that the Holy Spirit could infuse my ministry that way. I’m falling short.” And that’s okay, too. In fact, it’s more than okay, because it gives

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

you the chance to seek help and support from God, from other group leaders around you, and from the leaders in your church. It's a chance to grow.

What Group Leaders Do

The second part of this resource highlights different habits or patterns that are important in the life a small-group leader. These include Prayer Life (p. 14–15), Decisions (p. 18–19), Friends (p. 22–23), and more.

I recommend that you make your way through this material slowly, and that you always keep the following question in mind: Where do I fit in comparison to this standard? Again, the idea is not to make you feel guilty or unworthy because of all the things you don't have time to do. The idea is to read about the foundational elements of a small-group leader and allow the Holy Spirit to nudge you about pieces of your life and ministry that might need to be improved.

My Take

For what it's worth, here are some thoughts that have stuck in my mind as I've read through and edited "Foundations of a Group Leader":

- **Pay special attention to the Anointing article.** I think a lot of Christians, myself included, have a lot of confusion about how the Holy Spirit affects our life and ministries. We know the Holy Spirit is important, but we're not sure how to "plug in" to the power he offers us. Heather Zempel has some great advice on this subject in the Anointing article—especially the section labeled "Plugging Into God's Power."
- **Don't read alone.** I'm repeating myself here, but the least effective way to use the material in this resource is to read it by yourself and try to apply it by yourself. That's not a knock on the articles—if you read through this download, you will learn new and interesting things about yourself and the intricacies of being a small-group leader. But if you keep them to yourself, there is a much smaller chance that anything will change for you.

So find another group leader and talk about what you're learning. Or find your spouse, or your coach, or a member of your group.

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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The Character of a Group Leader

What kind of person are you when you're all alone?

By Heather Zempel

If you're a small-group leader, why do people follow you? Is it because you have a title or position? Is it because you wield some level of power? Is it because you have a magnetic personality or reputation? There are many reasons why someone might decide to follow you, but there is only one reason that will be sustainable over the long-haul: character.

In *A Fish Out of Water*, George Barna explains: "The word *character* is derived from a Greek term that refers to engraving, implying that character is the sum of the indelible marks imprinted on you that shape your thoughts and behavior. Character is your inner substance—the content of your heart that is manifested through your behavior and values." That means everything we do plays a role in creating our character. Every time we think something, say something, make a decision, do something, or leave something undone, we are forming our character. People follow leaders of character, and they follow because the leader displays a character that they can trust.

So let's look at three trust-builders that will be essential in your role as a small-group leader: honesty, consistency of character, and fulfillment of promises.

Honesty

In Proverbs 16:30, we learn how far honesty can take us: "Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks truth." As a child, I was taught that "honesty is the best policy," and I still believe that is correct. There were times when I worked on Capitol Hill that I struggled to know how to "play" or "communicate" a situation, and I am ashamed to say that I was often surprised to find that honesty is the best choice. Plain, clear-cut honesty.

A lie is a lie, and lies chip away at your integrity regardless of how white they are. But honesty goes further than true vs. false. Honesty is also about telling the whole truth. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say. Over time, honesty will sustain us and build trust between us and those we lead. Like Jacob in Genesis 30:33, we must be people who can say, "My honesty will testify for me in the future."

Consistency of Behavior

Trust is also built when we display consistency of character. Nineteenth-century clergyman Phillip Brooks said, "Character is made in the small moments of our lives." Thinking back to my Capitol Hill days, I once worked with a person that was completely unpredictable. I never knew from one minute to the next what mood they might be in, how they might react to my proposals, and how willing they would be to work with me. It changed hourly.

That type of working environment is very difficult. It's so much easier to work with people who are consistent despite their mood or circumstances. Consistency of behavior means that we are the same person in public as we are in private, and that we treat people the same regardless of what they can do for us. It means that we make hard decisions and that our actions match our words.

Sometimes, we are more concerned with our *reputations* than with our *character*. Dale Carnegie cautions us in that respect: "Be more concerned about your character than your reputation. Your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are."

Consistency of character builds a safety net for the people who follow you.

Fulfillment of Promises

Trust is built as you fulfill your promises. How often have I told someone I would pray for them when I had absolutely no intention of putting that person on my weekly prayer list? I've discovered it's much better for me to pray right there and then for the person rather than giving the appropriate Christian promise with no intention of fulfilling it.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

As group leaders, we must be very careful about what promises we state and what promises we imply. What commitments are we making to God, ourselves, our church, and our groups? And are we fulfilling them?

Test Yourself

We need to regularly and intentionally check our character. The following questions have been very helpful for me when I need to give myself a character self-check. They are from John Maxwell's *Becoming a Person of Influence*.

1. How well do I treat people from whom I can gain nothing?
2. Am I transparent with others?
3. Do I role-play based on the person(s) I am with?
4. Am I the same person when I'm in the spotlight as I am when I'm alone?
5. Do I quickly admit wrongdoing without being pressed to do so?
6. Do I put other people ahead of my personal agenda?
7. Do I have an unchanging standard for moral decisions, or do circumstances determine my choices?
8. Do I make difficult decisions, even when they have a personal cost attached to them?
9. When I have something to say about people, do I talk to them or about them?
10. Am I accountable to at least one other person for what I think, say, and do?

As we seek to lay a solid foundation for our role as a small-group leader, we must ensure that our character is solid. Any crack in our integrity will render our ministry structures unstable.

Of course, I'm the first to admit that I'm not there. None of us will ever "arrive." It takes ongoing effort and intentionality and remaining rooted in the Scriptures to be continuously growing into a person of character.

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Discuss:

1. Am I honest with people?
2. Do I have a consistent character, or does it change back and forth?
3. Do I follow through with the promises I make? How can I do so even better?



The Anointing of a Group Leader

Why the Holy Spirit is vital to your ministry.

By Heather Zempel

The first leaders of the early church were chosen based on the following criteria: “Look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and *full of the Holy Spirit* and wisdom” (emphasis mine).

Without an anointing of the Holy Spirit that is active and evident in our lives, we will never be able to fulfill the ministry that God has given us. In fact, this characteristic was so important to the early church that they made it one of the top 3 criteria for choosing its first leaders.

Jesus himself was “anointed... with the Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38). Here are some other examples of people filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts:

- The 120 in the Upper Room (Acts 2:4)
- Peter, addressing the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8)
- Stephen, a deacon (Acts 6:3–5, 7:55)
- Paul (Acts 13:9)
- Barnabas (Acts 11:24)

In fact, it is hard to think of a major player in the early church that Scripture does not describe as being filled with the Spirit. Here are some of the ways in which the Spirit led that early group of leaders:

- The Gospel spread to the Gentiles because Peter was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:9–23, 11:1–18).
- Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey because of the prompting of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1–4).
- Paul followed the leadership of the Spirit throughout his ministry (Acts 16:6–8, 19:21, 20:22).

Why is the anointing of the Holy Spirit important? There are two primary reasons. First, so that you can lay your foundation and build your ministry using power tools. Second, so that you will know how to engage in spiritual warfare, pray with power, and make Spirit-led decisions.

Building with Power Tools

There is a tremendous difference between regular tools and power tools. In Acts, Jesus said, “When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power.” The anointing of the Holy Spirit turns our works into works of power. The Bible tells us that we all have tools given to us by the Holy Spirit. We typically call these tools “spiritual gifts.”

In 1 Corinthians 12:7, Paul says, “A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.” Peter agreed, “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another” (1 Peter 4:10). Paul also encouraged his readers to “try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12), and he reminded Timothy to use his gifts in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6.

God has given you a spiritual gift that will help you build your small group and ministry. Identify that spiritual gift. Learn about it. Read about how it’s used in Scripture or other people that had those gifts. Learn about its limitations and abuses. We need to understand what tools the Holy Spirit has given us, how to access them, and the proper way to use them. We need to practice and experiment with our gifts. The anointing of the Holy Spirit puts power tools into our hands.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Leading with Power Insight

There is a real and active enemy of the people of God, and leaders are charged with fighting against his schemes. In Acts 20:28, Paul told the leaders at Ephesus to “keep watch over yourselves and all of the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”

Small-group leaders and ministry leaders are like shepherds, and we must protect the flock that God has entrusted to us. The anointing of the Holy Spirit will help you wage that fight through prayer. You will be led in how to pray, what to pray, and when to pray for those that you lead. The Holy Spirit will also bring discernment to your leadership. Discernment has never been one of my gifts, but over the last couple years, I have learned that God will give me discernment about the people that I lead and I need to be sensitive to that. Don't brush away those “hunches” that you get during prayer. Have the boldness to act on what you sense the Holy Spirit is leading you to do.

Plugging into God's Power

So how do you receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit into your life? It's certainly cannot be reduced to a formula. Jesus simply told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem to wait, watch, and pray for it. That's the only formula I really know. Here are some practical things you can do as you seek to be filled, empowered, and led by the Holy Spirit in your leadership:

- **Ask for it.** That seems simple enough, huh? In Luke 10:11–13, Jesus explains: “You fathers, if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”
- **Learn about it.** You may want to place yourself in a community or a discipline of learning more about the power of the Holy Spirit. Consider attending a group like Holy Spirit Encounter or picking up the book *Plugged Into God's Power*.
- **Dig into the Bible.** Read through the Book of Acts in one sitting to get a feel for the story. It's full of adventure and fear and miracles and excitement, but we miss that when we read chapter by chapter. Immerse yourself in the Book of Acts and look specifically at the role of the Holy Spirit.

Final Thoughts

In the Book of Acts, we see a small band of Christ followers huddled in prayer. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came rushing into their lives—Scripture says it was “like a mighty windstorm.” And Peter—who had denied that he even knew Jesus 40 days earlier—preached a message that resulted in three thousand people becoming Christ-followers.

Whenever most of us think of the Holy Spirit, the image of a dove is what immediately comes to mind. But the images I see of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts are nothing like a dove. I see fire and wind and storms and power. Here's my question: Are we allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to work through us? Or are we just running around being busy with ministry and actually blocking the flow of the Holy Spirit?

When I compare what I know as church to what I read in the Scripture, I have to acknowledge the reality that there was a power working in and through them that is largely absent in us. We need to have a fresh encounter—a windstorm experience with the Holy Spirit.

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Discuss:

1. What image accurately captures my experience with the Holy Spirit? A windstorm? A whisper? A blazing fire? A spark?
2. What spiritual gifts have our group members been empowered with?
3. What steps can the group take to better use those gifts?



The Doctrine of a Group Leader

Be sure to build your group on a solid foundation.

By Heather Zempel

An old Lutheran hymn declares, “How firm a foundation / Ye saints of the Lord / Is laid for your faith / In His excellent Word!” In the New Testament, Paul warns that whoever builds must be careful because the only sure foundation is Jesus Christ. Thus, we must base our lives and leadership on the Word of God. Author and theologian Wayne Grudem said, “Today, the Bible contains all the words of God that a person needs to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian.”

Doctrine may sound like a scary word, but it’s simply the intellectual framework for our faith. Grudem defines doctrine as “what the whole Bible teaches us today about some particular topic.”

What kind of foundation are we building upon? Are we building on the foundation that Christ laid and that the first century church built upon? Or are we building on a foundation of our own making?

The Importance of Doctrine

First and foremost, doctrine helps us to grow as Christians. First Timothy 6:3 says that the teachings of Christ “are the foundation for a godly life.” The more we know about God and his ways, the more we can trust him, praise him, and tell others about him. It’s important because the way we think affects the way we act, and right thinking leads to right action. As Paul said in Titus 2:1, “Promote the kind of living that reflects right teaching.”

Secondly, growing in our understanding of God’s truth enables us to obey the command of Christ to teach others everything he commanded (Matthew 28:19–20). We typically view this verse as a challenge to evangelism, but it also includes a challenge to teach.

Finally, commitment to sound doctrine is a pre-requisite for leadership in the church. In 1 Timothy 3:9, Paul tells Timothy that leaders in the church must “be committed to the revealed truths of the Christian faith.” And in 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul encourages Timothy to “watch your life and doctrine closely.” Titus 1:9 says that a leader must “have a strong and steadfast belief in the trustworthy message he was taught.”

Application of Doctrine

Paul describes the proper application of doctrine in 2 Timothy 2:16–17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

In his book *Bible Study Methods*, Rick Warren summarizes these four applications as follows: “Teaching shows us the path on which we are to walk; rebuking shows us where we got off the path; correcting tells us how to get back on the path, and training in righteousness teaches how to stay on that path.”

Let’s look more closely at these four applications.

- **Teaching.** As group leaders, we must teach the principles of Scripture to those we lead. What is the content that you are teaching your group? Is it based on and consistent with the truths of God’s Word?
- **Rebuking.** Our job as group leaders is not to rebuke; that’s the Holy Spirit’s job. We do have a responsibility, however, to help other people use the Bible as their foundation. We must lovingly elevate Scripture as the authority and as the standard by which we judge all things.
- **Correcting.** Half of spiritual growth is correcting those areas that are not aligned with Scripture. As leaders, we can come alongside others and encourage them as they align their lives with the truth of God’s Word.
- **Training.** The other half of spiritual growth is training to do the work that God has given us to do. As group leaders, we are responsible to equip others to do the work of the ministry. How are we using the Bible to help others pursue God’s calling on their lives?

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Doctrine in Small Groups

As we develop true, transparent, real-life community, questions of faith and doctrine will be a routine part of group life. We must know the truth of the Word of God and be confident in establishing it as the standard.

Here are some specific and practical guidelines that may be helpful as you strive to build your life, leadership, and group on a solid doctrinal foundation:

- **Focus the group on what Scripture says, not on what it says to us.** Too often, groups go in circles discussing what a passage of Scripture “means to them.” We should never ask “What does this passage mean to you?” We should only ask “What does this passage say?” and “What does this passage *mean*?” There is a difference between asking how a passage of Scripture makes us feel (which can be a helpful discussion) and asking people to attach their own individualized and personalized interpretations (which doesn’t really help at all).
- **Bring everything back to Scripture.** If you’ve led a small group for long enough, you’ve probably encountered a disagreement here or there. That’s fine. Just require that everyone support their point of view using the Bible. You’ve probably also encountered situations where someone said something that was totally contrary to Scripture. Again, encourage them to back up their argument with the Bible.
- **Point people towards the Bible for answers.** As a small-group leader, you are not expected to know all the answers to every question that could pop up, and you should not feel pressured to give all the answers that you do know. You should, however, be confident that the Bible is the ultimate authority and be prepared to “guard the Gospel” (2 Timothy 1:13–14). If a question comes up that the group would like to explore in depth, give them an assignment to search it out in the Scriptures for the next group meeting. Teaching sound doctrine in the right attitude will create places where truth meets life so that transformation is possible.
- **Pray Scriptures over your group members.** One way to build your leadership and group on a solid foundation is to pray the promises of Scripture over your group members. Do it within the group meeting time to model for them one way of praying according to God’s will. This also demonstrates to them the importance of the Bible.

A Warning

If we are not careful, we can become prideful and pompous in our biblical knowledge. Building on solid doctrine does not mean we become legalistic. Rather, building on solid doctrine means that we create opportunities where people can learn the truth and experience the freedom of living in that truth (John 8:32).

To teach and implement sound doctrine, we must hold two things in tight tension. First, we must have an unswerving, uncompromising love for the Word of God. Secondly, we must have an intense, unconditional love for people. Anything else results in imbalance (2 Timothy 2:25).

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Discuss:

1. How confident do I feel about my grasp of Evangelical doctrine? How familiar am I with our church’s statement of beliefs?
2. When was the last time our group had a good, solid doctrinal discussion? What made the experience positive?
3. What books can I read or who can I talk with to improve my knowledge and application of what the Bible says?



The Humility of a Group Leader

Here's why the best leaders strive to be nothing.

By Heather Zempel

When you pray for the leadership traits of Jesus to develop in your own life, which ones do you pray for? What leadership skills do you work hard at? If you are like me, then communication, vision, team-building, delegation, time-management, and Bible knowledge are right at the top of the list. Some of the seemingly less exciting issues like character development and providing care for others might be on there as well.

But when was the last time humility was on your prayer list? Has humility ever been a leadership goal for you?

Humility is not at the top of any lists of preferred qualities for business leaders. It's rarely mentioned in books on leadership, even in Christian and biblically based leadership books. However, our effectiveness as spiritual leaders hinges on our relationship with God, and that means that humility must be at the forefront of our growth goals.

Let's begin by looking at some definitions of humility. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon defined humility as "the proper estimate of oneself." Andrew Murray defined humility as the "displacement of self by the enthronement of God." C. J. Mahaney said that humility is "honestly assessing ourselves in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness." Each of these definitions is helpful as we seek to become people of humility.

God's Thoughts on Humility

The Bible speaks a lot on the topic of humility. It is commended in Proverbs at least 5 times, and John the Baptist understood its importance when he said, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Here are some principles we can draw from Scripture.

- **Humility keeps us from sin.** Pride, the opposite of humility, was the original sin. Satan fell because he wanted to be greater than God, and sin always seems to be tied to some form of pride or self-sufficiency. Scripture tells us repeatedly that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5). The word "opposes" is an active tense, and it carries with it the meaning of an immediate and constant opposition. As we remain humble, we receive God's grace.
- **God is drawn to humility.** Another dynamic we see in Scripture is that God is drawn to humility. Isaiah 66:2 says, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." If we want God's presence in our lives, then an attitude of humility invites his presence.
- **Christ modeled humility for us.** Consider how many times Jesus said he was "nothing" or did nothing out of his own power. Meditate on the following verses: "Learn from me, I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). And on the night that Jesus arguably could have thought of no one except himself, he picked up a towel and washed the feet of the men who would later betray him, deny him, and leave him at the moment of his greatest need.
- **Humility characterizes the church.** We are told twice to "clothe" ourselves in humility—Colossians 3:12 and 1 Peter 5:5. How well do we wear our humility? Is it comfortable or awkward? The word in 1 Peter means to clothe oneself for service—like wearing an apron. Humility is seen in the way we relate to one another in the Body of Christ.

Seeking Humility

Humility does not just happen. We will not simply wake up one morning and make a decision to be humble. No amount of teaching and training will force humility to take root. It is something that must become the focus of our prayer, discipline, and desire. Ultimately, only the indwelling of Christ can make us people of humility.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Still, there are things we can do to open ourselves up to that indwelling—to create an atmosphere where Christ can grow humility in us. Here are some examples:

- **Every morning, go to the cross and express your dependence upon Christ.** This accomplishes three things. First, going to the cross reminds us of the ultimate humility of Christ. Second, it helps us recognize and acknowledge our need for Christ. Third, our expression of thankfulness for Jesus' sacrifice and our confession of dependence will prepare our hearts for directing glory to God throughout the day.
- **Study the humility of Christ.** Start by looking at the following passages: John 5:19; John 5:30; John 5:41; John 6:38; John 7:16, 28; John 8:28, 42, 50; John 14:10, 24. Meditate on the circumstances of his birth, the Passion Week, and his sacrifice.
- **Look back each day.** At the end of the day, review your day with God and reflect glory back to him for your accomplishments. Confess sin and ask God to be your strength in weakness.
- **Seek feedback and correction.** We cannot become people of humility on our own. We must actively invite and pursue the feedback and correction of others. It's called accountability. Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." Find some other leaders and friends who can help you grow in the area of humility.

Martin Luther said, "God created the world out of nothing, and as long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us." Let's seek to be nothing so that God can pour all of himself into us!

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Discuss:

1. Who is the most humble person I am aware of? What makes me identify that person as humble?
2. When have I acted in an un-humble manner? What was the outcome?
3. What steps will I need to take to practice the suggestions listed above for creating an atmosphere that is receptive to humility?



The Endurance of a Group Leader

Building a group and a ministry that lasts.

By Heather Zempel

Ministry is a life-long race we must run, but sometimes I run it like I'm stealing second base. In other words, I feel this pressure to make a quick leap and run as fast as I can so I won't be disqualified. In that moment of nervous thrill, I pay no attention to a twisted ankle or a fellow teammate. When you steal second, you don't care who you might run over and you don't pay attention to anything other than that white square bag. You just run.

But fulfilling our ministry will never happen that way. We've got to find a pace and rhythms that allow us to finish well. We've got to take in our environment and the players around us. Here's the big question: Can you do what you are doing now for another 25 years?

I don't think I've ever met a group leader who didn't want to finish well. Who wants to burn out or fall morally? Who sets out determined to fail? And yet many leaders experience the very thing they hope to avoid. If we want to lay a solid foundation, then it's imperative to know what we plan to build on top of that foundation. We must begin with the end in mind and know what we want that to look like.

I've been doing small groups for about 10 years, but I am totally unqualified to talk about what it means to finish well. So I'd like to introduce you to another voice. The following lists are taken from the book *Leaders on Leadership*, by George Barna. They come specifically from Chapter 8, "The Life Cycle of a Leader, which was written by J. Robert Clinton and Richard W. Clinton.

A Leader Who Finished Well Is One Who...

- Maintains a personal, vibrant relationship with God right up until the end.
- Maintains a learning posture and learns from various kinds of sources, but especially from life.
- Gives evidence of Christlikeness in character through the fruit of the Spirit in his life.
- Lives out truth in life such that his convictions and the promises of God are seen to be real.
- Leaves behind one or more ultimate contributions—that is, a lasting legacy.
- Walks with a growing awareness of a sense of destiny and sees some or all of it fulfilled.

Seven Major Barriers to Finishing Well Include...

- Finances—their use and abuse
- Power—its abuse
- Inordinate pride, which leads to downfall
- Sex and illicit relationships
- Family—critical issues
- Plateauing
- Emotional and psychological wounding

Five Things a Leader Can Do to Enhance the Chance of Finishing Well:

- Have a broad perspective on a lifetime of ministry from which to interpret ongoing ministry.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

- All leaders should expectantly look for repeated times of renewal. Most leaders who have been effective over a lifetime have needed and welcomed renewal experiences from time to time in their lives.
- Practice the disciplines. Leaders need discipline of all kinds—especially the spiritual disciplines.
- Assume a learning posture. The single most important antidote to plateauing is a well-developed learning posture.
- Have mentors.

All of us desire to hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). And it’s never too early to begin laying that foundation. Many of us need to make some changes, and those changes might be painful to us or to others. But if we want to have an enduring heart, we must find a pace and forms of ministry that are sustainable.

For example, we may need to say no to leading that second group in order to say yes to personal mentoring. We may need to carve out time to read and develop our leadership gifts.

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Discuss:

1. Can I keep doing what I’m doing for the next 25 years? Can our small group?
2. Am I in danger of any of the barriers listed above? If so, how can I move beyond it?
3. What steps can I take to increase my endurance as a group leader?



The Prayer Life of a Group Leader

What one group leader is learning about our most important job.

By Heather Zempel

The great reformer Martin Luther said, “I generally pray two hours every day, except on very busy days. On those days, I pray three.” Luther was a pretty busy man—defending his theology, translating the Bible into German, writing books, and leading a Reformation. So I imagine he spent several days in 3-hour prayer.

How I wish I were more like Luther! Instead of following Luther’s example and praying more on my crazy days, I tend to pray less. Instead of coming to the recognition that Bill Hybel’s did that I am *Too Busy Not to Pray*, I sacrifice my time with God for other pursuits. It’s dangerous. It means I am building on a shaky foundation of my own making and not on a solid rock of dependence on Christ.

Prayer is one of the most critical disciplines of a godly leader, and it is a key component of solid spiritual foundations. It is ridiculous to think we could do justice to this topic in a single article, so I will simply share some of the things that I am personally trying to practice during this season of my life.

Prioritize Prayer

Prayer must become a priority for you as a small-group leader. It isn’t an add-on or something to do when you’ve got the time. It must become the first thing you do in the morning and the last thing you do at night. In Mark 1:35, we read that “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Jesus rose early to pray.

I am becoming an evangelist for early morning prayer! I am not a morning person—never have been and probably never will be—so I always did my prayer and Bible study at night. But this year I set a new goal to come down to the office early each morning and spend time in prayer and Bible study. It has made an amazing difference in my day. I have learned experientially what Civil War-era pastor E.M. Bounds described: “The men who have done the most for God in this world have been early on their knees. He who fritters away the early morning, its opportunity and freshness, in other pursuits than seeking God will make poor headway seeking Him the rest of the day. If God is not first in your thoughts and efforts in the morning, He will be in the last place the remainder of the day.”

Making prayer a priority means doing it first thing in the morning. If you’re not a morning person, it doesn’t have to be long. Just a simple acknowledgement of your complete dependence upon God and a casting of cares upon him.

The second way to make prayer a priority is to set aside special times and places for it. In Luke 5:16 we read, “But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness to pray.” And in Matthew 14:23, “Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.” Jesus was constantly seeking out solitude for prayer—before he chose his disciples, after the beheading of John the Baptist, and so on. In fact, it seems he often slipped away from the crowds at his most popular moments.

Here’s the thought that keeps coming back to me: If Jesus prayed this much, then how much more do I need to pray?

Depend on Prayer

As group leaders, we can become lazy and depend upon our strengths, our spiritual gifts, our personality, and our track record. My greatest fear is getting to a place as a leader where I can “fake it” without depending 100 percent on God in prayer. We must depend on prayer for growing as leaders, leading our groups, and making decisions.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

We should depend on prayer when making leadership decisions. The best leadership decisions come after prayer. Jesus prayed all night before choosing his 12 disciples (Luke 6:12). How much time do we spend in prayer before choosing apprentice leaders or choosing curriculum?

We should depend on prayer for our leadership. If we look at the lives of the 1st century leaders, prayer was the preparation for ministry. The Holy Spirit came on those who prayed (Acts 2). Prayer set the stage for the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9). The leaders of the early church began everything with prayer and they depended on prayer. Their ministry flowed out of their prayer lives. I think I sometimes get it backwards. I tend to pray in order for God to bless my ministry. The early leaders prayed in order to discover their ministry.

Pray for Those You Lead

Pray for your group members daily. On the worst night of his life, Jesus modeled this for us by praying for his disciples (John 17). One of the best ways to pray for your group members is to pray Scriptures over them. Here are some examples of passages that you can memorize and pray for your group:

- Ephesians 1:17–19
- Ephesians 3:16–19
- Philippians 1:9–11
- Colossians 1:9–12
- 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3

When you pray for your group members, begin with thanksgiving. When you come to God in thankfulness for people, he fills your heart with his love for them and you see them more through his eyes.

Model Prayer for Those You Lead

Finally, model prayer for those you lead. That's what Jesus did in Matthew 6 when he taught them to pray using the Lord's Prayer. Prioritize prayer in your group so that your group is *built* on prayer. Often, prayer becomes an add-on at the end of a group meeting. It's an afterthought or a "closer." Find opportunities to spend quality time in prayer in your group, teach on its importance, and model it for the people you lead.

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Discuss:

1. Am I satisfied with my prayer life right now? Why or why not?
2. Am I satisfied with my group's experience with prayer? What steps can I take to improve our experiences?
3. Who is someone that models prayer for me? What can I learn from that person?



The Time of a Group Leader

You can't manage time, but you can manage yourself.

By Heather Zempel

If you've led a small group for any length of time, then you know one of the greatest challenges that comes with the territory is time management. The more people you lead, the more demands will be placed on your time. The more responsibilities you are given, the less time you have. But how can we maintain a healthy balance and accomplish all that God has equipped, empowered, and entrusted us to do?

Here's the first troubling truth you should know: the whole idea of time management is a myth. No one can actually manage time. Seconds, minutes, and hours tick by, and there is absolutely nothing we can do to change it. Everyone lives by the same segments of time every year; we've all got 525,600 minutes.

What you can do is manage yourself. Here are some ways to do that:

Prioritize Your Time with God

If you make time with God your first and most important appointment, then the rest of your day will fall into place much better. Putting God first also shapes the way you manage the flow of your life.

Oswald Sanders said, "Each of us has the time to do the whole will of God for our lives." Henry Blackaby said, "The key to successful leadership is not creating more time in one's life or packing more activities into one's day, but staying on God's agenda."

If we keep ourselves on God's agenda each and every day, then that will help us strike the appropriate balance.

Discern the Urgent vs. Important

Unless you are proactive, the urgent will always take your attention away from the important. Emails are a good example. They are typically urgent, but not important, and yet they often distract our attention away from other projects. Meanwhile, the important matters of life, leadership, and discipleship sit on our to-do lists and never have our full attention.

One way to ensure that the important takes precedence over the urgent is to establish healthy routines. Intentionality is the name of the personal management game. What habits have you formed? Establishing healthy routines will keep you on track. The first routine should be time with God. The second should be time with family. Once those are established, you should look at how you spend your time and make sure there is balance.

Here are some areas that group leaders tend to neglect:

- Friendships
- Health and exercise
- Personal growth
- Proper rest
- Helping others grow as disciples
- Financial stewardship

Expect the Unexpected

Despite our best attempts at establishing routines and scheduling our day, we must always expect the unexpected. Still, we can prepare even for the unplanned.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

First, be intentional about your schedule. If you don't plan what you are going to do with your time, then someone else will. Other people will always have their own agenda for your time—especially other church leaders. I once double-booked one of my small-group leaders, for example. I did not double book *on* her. I double booked *for* her. I gave her two responsibilities that had to be done at the same time. (Fortunately, she graciously alerted me to the mistake). So be proactive in setting your schedule.

Second, plan for interruptions. They happen, and you need to be ready for them. Many times, interruptions are God-ordained, and we must be ready at all times to move onto God's agenda.

Finally, prepare for delays. How do you spend your expendable time while waiting in lines, in the doctor's office, in the airport? What time is wasted during the "hurry up and wait" rhythm of our lives? Take a book everywhere you go. Spend "delay time" in prayer. Write a letter to that friend you've been meaning to reconnect with. Memorize Scripture. Call someone. Oswald Sanders said, "The way we employ the surplus hours after provision has been made for work, meals, and sleep will determine if we develop into mediocre or powerful people."

Let me throw out a disclaimer. Sometimes we just need to "be" during the delays of life. We need to just sit. Sometimes an airline flight is the only time I get to brainstorm or grab a nap. Sometimes I need to play Pac-Man to blow off steam. The key is balance.

Delegate Everything You Can

Finally, the best way to manage yourself is to delegate everything that you can. A wise pastor once told me that a good leader can do it all, but a great leader doesn't do anything at all. A general rule of thumb is this: If someone can do it 60 percent as well as you, then turn it over to them and monitor their progress. If they can do it 70 percent as well as you, then turn it over to them completely.

Henry Blackaby said, "God doesn't give us more responsibility than we can handle or accomplish. But we often find ourselves saying yes to things that we should not be doing." Remember, everyone has an agenda for your time. If you don't schedule your life, someone else will schedule it for you. Be intentional about what you say yes to. Ask God if there is something you should say no to or delegate to someone else. Above all, seek first the kingdom of God.

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Discuss:

1. How do I tend to behave when I feel overly busy or harassed? How do I usually respond?
2. What steps do I need to take to ensure that time with God is my first priority?
3. What steps do I need to take in order to delegate different areas of my small-group responsibilities?



The Decisions of a Group Leader

Learn to seek God, seek counsel, and move with intentionality.

By Heather Zempel

“A visionary may see, but a leader must decide.” According to Oswald Sanders, decision-making is the mark of a true leader.

We make decisions every day, and leaders bear the added burden of making decisions that affect not only themselves, but other people and entire organizations. Small-group leaders face weekly decisions (where will we meet and who brings the snacks?), semester decisions (what curriculum will we study?), long-term decisions (who are my potential leaders and how will we multiply?), and life-long decisions (who will disciple me and who will I disciple?).

Like the other topics we have explored in this Foundations series, decision-making is one of those critical, important leadership skills that are often marginalized by the urgent matters at hand. Making decisions is one of the hardest jobs of a leader. Decisions take time, listening, patience, persistence, and confidence. However, good decision making—while difficult in the short term—will multiply benefits in the long term. Good decision making will give your team confidence in your leadership.

Every leader must answer to God for the decisions that they make. That raises the stakes very high and often leaves us in a state of wanting to make no decisions at all. The problem with that is that “no decision” is still a decision, and it’s always the wrong one. So how can we be leaders that follow God’s direction?

Seek God

There are two primary skills every leader must learn in order to make good decisions. The first is the ability to hear from God. James 5:1–6 says: “If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind.” There are two parts to this. First, we must ask. And second, we must have faith that God will give us the direction that we need.

The two main ways we hear God speak to us is through his Word and through prayer. God isn’t a slot machine ready to dispense answers. He is a person, and we develop our relationship with him through reading the Scriptures and praying. As we remain rooted in the Word and prayer, we will learn to hear God’s voice when we need direction. Memorizing Scripture is important in this process, as well, because it keeps God’s ways at the forefront of our minds as we encounter and navigate decisions.

Seek Counsel

Another decision-making skill is seeking the counsel of other people. We should never try to lead on our own. Proverbs 13:10 says, “Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.” Proverbs 11:14 says, “Without good direction, people lose their way; the more wise counsel you follow, the better your chances” (msg).

The first task is to find wise counselors. Surround yourself with a variety of people—people who are similar to you and people who are different than you, people who are older than you and people who are younger than you. Find people who have a heart first and foremost for God. The story of Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12 shows us what can happen when we follow the advice of people we like as opposed to people we should respect. Rehoboam’s foolish decision led to a split in the nation of Israel.

The second task is to actually ask for their counsel and respond to it. That doesn’t mean always doing what they say, but it does mean listening, considering, praying, and thoughtfully responding.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Decision-Making Challenges

Some of us make decisions easily, while others labor over decisions and dread them. Some of us have quick, decisive instincts, while the rest of us slowly process. Some of us rush into decisions, while others avoid them. There are a number of decision-making challenges that we should acknowledge and watch for. A few are indecisiveness, timing, and post-decision responsibility.

The first is simply indecisiveness. It's one thing to be slow, methodical, and prayerful in making a decision. It's another thing to waffle. Indecisiveness may be an indication that you are not relying on God or trusting in his direction. It can also be an indication of leadership laziness that waits until a default answer reveals itself. As Christina Borja once said, "Don't say yes to something just because it's so hard to say no."

The second challenge is timing. Good leaders understand the consequences of premature decisions, late decisions, and hasty decisions. Premature decisions happen when we don't take all of the facts and variables into consideration. They happen when we don't pray about things. Premature decisions usually result in wrong choices, and the mistake becomes apparent in time. Hasty decisions occur when we want try to expedite the decision-making process. One hasty decision usually proves itself to be wrong in a short period of time, which often leads to another hasty decision that is equally destructive. Late decisions occur when we delay the process. Sometimes, late decisions are right, but they occur too late and lead to team frustration

The third challenge is the one that comes with taking responsibility for your decisions. Once you've made a decision, you have to live with that. President Harry Truman was known for his decisiveness. His famous value "The buck stops here" highlights his commitment to being responsible for his decisions. As leaders, we must deal with the consequences of our decisions and stand firmly by them once they are made. We must not waffle back and forth by the winds of opinion. On the other hand, if we have clearly made the wrong choice, we must be quick to admit the mistake and be intentional about changing course.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins said, "The real question is, once you know the right thing, do you have the discipline to do the right thing—and equally important, to stop doing the wrong things?"

As a small-group leader, you make decisions every day, week, semester, and year, and those choices turn into the life that you live. Seek God. Seek others. And move with intentionality.

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Discuss:

1. Am I currently hearing from God through his Word and through prayer?
2. What ways have our small-group members provided counsel for each other in recent months? What steps can we take to make this happen more often?
3. Am I currently waffling about any decisions? Am I currently regretting a decision I've already made?



The Growth of a Group Leader

Several important steps to keep your arrow pointing up.

By Heather Zempel

Romans 12:8 says, “If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility *seriously*” (nlt, emphasis mine). Other translations use the words *diligence* and *zeal* to describe how we must carry out our leadership gifts and duties.

In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul reminded Timothy of the spiritual gift he had received and encouraged him not to neglect it. The original language carries the meaning of “making light of,” “disregarding,” and “being negligent.” In his second letter to Timothy, Paul’s language became even stronger as he encouraged Timothy to “fan into flame” or “stir up” the spiritual gifts he had been given (2 Timothy 1:6). Paul wanted to ensure that Timothy continued to grow in and refine his leadership gifts.

Leadership is a stewardship. God has entrusted this gift to us, and we have a responsibility to be good stewards of it. Leadership is not a destination; it’s a process. While spiritual growth is our first priority, Scripture also instructs us to grow in our leadership. Here are a few ways you can make leadership growth a priority:

Find Training

Becoming a great small-group leader is a life-long process, and you should take advantage of every training opportunity you can. As John Maxwell says, “If you think you’re done, then you are.” In other words, if you think you’ve arrived, then your influence will plateau. Or worse, it will disappear.

At National Community Church, we try to provide our leaders with many different forms of training each year. Our Annual Leadership Retreat is designed to propel them into the next year with vision, resources, and practical ideas. Our semester Leadership Summits are designed to give them advanced leadership training. And we’ve got a blog called [Wineskins for Discipleship](#) that provides rich resources for personal spiritual growth and leadership growth every week.

We don’t do these things to keep ourselves busy, keep tabs on our group leaders, or keep all of us off the streets. We do them because we take our Ephesians 4:11 mandate seriously—to equip (or perfect) our leaders for the work of the ministry. We understand the importance of developing leadership gifts, and we want to provide our leaders with every opportunity possible.

Surround Yourself with Leaders

Leadership is caught, not taught. I’m not sure who said that first, so I’ll credit Myron Goodwin, one of my former discipleship pastors. Training is good and we should pursue it throughout our lives, but it is limited in that it is primarily an academic and intellectual preparation and does not necessarily transfer the heart and passion of leadership.

That being said, one of the best ways to grow as a leader is to surround yourself with leaders who are a step or two ahead of you. Meet with them, pick their brains, and ask them questions. Take the initiative to ask them for a few minutes of their time. I’m so thankful for the pastors, teachers, coaches, and leaders who allowed me to spend a few minutes in their world.

But here’s what you have to do: First, think about what you want to learn from them. Most of the time, if you ask someone to mentor you, they don’t really know where to start, what you’re expecting, or what you need. Be very specific and practical about what you’d like to learn from them. Secondly, approach them. Take the initiative to go to the leader and ask them if you can spend a few minutes with them to pick their brain. Don’t expect a leader to come to you and begin to coach you. That would be presumptuous!

In addition to learning from leaders who have more experience than you, you should also be pouring into the lives of leaders and potential leaders who do not have as much experience as you have. At any given time in

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

your life, you should be growing from the leadership of another and you should be helping someone else grow. The theological term for that process is discipleship.

Identify Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Over time, your leadership strengths and weaknesses will reveal themselves. Leadership assessments and tests can give us some insight into what our strengths and weaknesses might be, but the full truth will emerge over time. We should lead from our strengths and manage around our weaknesses.

For instance, I'm not great at the administrative side of leadership, so I'm thankful for someone like Sarah Owen on my team who provides strength in that area. I'm not fantastic at compassion, so I'm grateful for Leslie Adams who stretches me in that area. Every leader is limited in their perspective, so I'm thankful for folks like Brian and Kim Hill and Nathan and Heather Gonzales who bring a more well-rounded view. Discover your strengths and lead from them. Then, build a team around you filled with people whose strengths complement yours.

A bit of a disclaimer is needed here. By "weakness," I mean some area of leadership skill that is not natural for you. I am not talking about sin. Sin is not a weakness to be managed around. Sin is sin that must be confronted, confessed, and repented of. We should also strive to grow in the fruit of the spirit and in obedience to the commands of Christ. Don't excuse your sin or lack of spiritual growth as a leadership weakness that you are managing around.

Read

In reading, we have the ability to do everything previously mentioned—find training, learn from other leaders, and identify our strengths and weaknesses. In 2 Timothy 4:12, Paul requested, "When you come... bring my books, and especially my papers." In *Spiritual Leadership*, Oswald Sanders speculated that these books and papers included not only Scriptures, but also Jewish histories, explanations of the law and the prophets, and perhaps even some of the pagan poets that Paul quoted in his sermons.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, stressed the importance of readership to his disciples. In fact, he told his younger ministers to read or get out of the ministry. We should read the following types of books:

- Books that will help us grow spiritually
- Books that help us grow intellectually
- Books that cultivate your teaching and leadership gifts and style
- Books that help you understand the times that we live in
- Books that help you grow as a leader

Finally...

The most important thing you can do to grow as a small-group leader is to put a plan into place. Identify some goals, write them down, and implement a strategy for reaching them.

What are your strengths and weaknesses? Where do you need to be trained? What leaders do you want to know better? What books do you need to read? A spiritual development plan or other personal growth plan will help you become more intentional in developing your character and your leadership abilities.

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Discuss:

1. In what area of life do I feel most prepared and trained? How did that develop?
2. Am I taking full advantage of the training opportunities at our church? How can I help improve those opportunities?
3. What books can I read in the next several months that will improve my skills as a group leader?



The Friends of a Group Leader

Three different kinds of people you need in your life.

By Heather Zempel

Author Donald Clifton said, “Relationships help us to define who we are and what we can become. Most of us can trace our successes to pivotal relationships.”

My original idea for this article was to focus on accountability. As small-group leaders, we certainly need accountability in our lives. But we need more than that. We need friends. And there are lots of different types of friends that we need in our lives to keep us balanced, challenged, and sane.

If we look at the life of King David, we see three types of friends in his life. First, he had friends that he hung out with outside the realm of his calling. Secondly, he had friends that he also led that were loyal to him to the death. Finally, he had friends that were willing to call him out and give him a good kick in the butt when needed. Let’s explore his life and relationships today to gain some insight on the types of friends that we need to surround ourselves with.

Jonathan

The friendship of David and Jonathan is legendary. Jonathan was the son of King Saul and the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. He knew that David had been anointed by the prophet Samuel to become the next king, but he still became like a brother to David.

We read in 1 Samuel 18: “Now when he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day, and would not let him go home to his father’s house anymore. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, even to his sword and his bow and his belt.”

Jonathan not only befriended David, but he protected David from his enemies. Later in the chapter, we see Jonathan working to keep David safe from the murderous spirit of his own father, Saul. What strikes me as interesting about their relationship is that Jonathan’s rightful place of leadership and David’s prophesied place of leadership never entered into their friendship. It was never an issue.

As leaders, we need friends that are just that—friends, with no leadership demands or expectations. I’m so thankful for people like Julie Schaer. Like Jonathan, Julie should have been my enemy (oh, the stories I could tell you from elementary school days), but we became close friends. Both of us are in places of leadership in our own spheres, but when we are together, it’s just Julie and Heather. No demands, expectations, or pressures. Just people navigating life together.

I’m also thankful for people like Leslie Adams. We were friends before I became “Pastor Heather.” But when that title came, our friendship did not change. Yes, we minister together and alongside each other, but our friendship leaves our church roles at the door.

Every leader needs a Jonathan—someone who recognizes the leadership gifts and calling inside of their friend, but doesn’t allow that to be an issue in their friendship. These are probably the friends I am most thankful for.

The Mighty Men

Secondly, David had a group of 30 mighty men who were willing to give their life for him. They included guys like Abishai, who killed three hundred enemies with a spear; Benaiah, who chased a lion into a pit on a snowy day; and Eleazer, who killed Philistines until he was too tired to lift his sword anymore.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Let's read in 2 Samuel 23:13–17:

Then three of the thirty chief men went down at harvest time and came to David at the cave of Adullam. And the troop of Philistines encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem. And David said with longing, "Oh, that someone would give me a drink of the water from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

So the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David. Nevertheless he would not drink it, but poured it out to the Lord. And he said, "Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this! Is this not the blood of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it.

These guys were so committed and loyal to David's leadership that they took a whispered wish as a command. Let me throw out a little disclaimer here. I am not talking about surrounding yourself with only "yes men." I am talking about making sure there are people on your leadership team who are willing to give themselves to the path that God has called the team to walk.

What's interesting is where these mighty men came from. They weren't ready made leaders. In fact, they were pretty much losers. If we turn an entire book back to 1 Samuel 22:2, we find out who they were when David first met them: "Then others began coming—men who were in trouble or in debt or who were just discontented—until David was the leader of about four hundred men."

These guys were loyal to David not because they were yes men or had been specifically and uniquely trained for their calling. They were loyal to David because he had been a friend to them first. We need people in our lives who understand and embrace what God has called us to and are willing to jump on that team and invest their lives into God's work.

Nathan

Finally, David had a friend named Nathan who was not afraid to confront David and steer him back towards the right course. We all know the story. David was at the wrong place at the wrong time, committed adultery, and then orchestrated murder to cover the sin. The prophet Nathan confronted David:

Then Nathan said to David, "You are that man! The Lord, the God of Israel, says: I anointed you king of Israel and saved you from the power of Saul. I gave you your master's house and his wives and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. And if that had not been enough, I would have given you much, much more. Why, then, have you despised the word of the Lord and done this horrible deed? For you have murdered Uriah the Hittite with the sword of the Ammonites and stolen his wife. From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own.... Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

We need people that will confront us, challenge us, and give us a good swift kick in the butt. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."

As leaders, we need friends who recognize we are people in need of encouragement, correction, and rebuke and that will point us back towards God and his path. This is where accountability comes in. Who has permission to ask you any question at any time? To whom do you confess your sins? Who is praying for you and confronting you when necessary?

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Discuss:

1. Do I have friends in each of these categories?
2. Do my friends have my permission to keep me accountable and ask tough questions? Do they take advantage of that permission?
3. Who are some people in my group that I could be a friend and a blessing to?



Final Reflections

Heather's concluding thoughts on building a solid foundation.

By Heather Zempel

Am I a leader worth imitating?

That question challenges me constantly. Paul encouraged the believers at Corinth to “imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). I’ve always thought it interesting that he said “Imitate *me*” and not “imitate *Christ*.” As leaders, we’ve got to live a life that imitates Christ and ask others to join us in that journey. One aspect of leadership is inviting people to follow you—not only in your direction, but in the way that you live.

As I’ve reflected on the ideas of priorities, purpose, and endurance, I’ve recognized two things:

- I want to lead myself well.
- I want to finish well.

When I train leaders here at National Community Church, I only really talk about three basic topics, and one of them is the idea of “leading yourself well.” I’m absolutely convinced that our leadership must flow out of a place of abundance in Christ, and leading ourselves well is the first step in leadership development. If we cannot lead ourselves, we have no business leading others.

The material that I’ve written for this resource comes from a very raw place within me. These are the things that I struggle with and the areas in which I want to grow. I want to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. But that won’t happen just by saying it long enough or wishing it hard enough.

Recently I identified some areas I will be thinking about and working on personally to help me lay a foundation that will last.

Relationships

I don’t know if it’s a season that I’m in or if it’s something new I’ve learned, but I’m at a place where I believe that the majority of our leadership potential is found in the people we surround ourselves with. In a recent sermon, I made the observation that “Your friends will determine the quality and direction of your life.” (I’m pretty sure I stole that from Andy Stanley, by the way.)

Who are our friends? Who are the people loving us, encouraging us, challenging us, praying for us? Jesus was concerned about relationships, as evidenced by his prayer in John 17:6–26. When I think back to the biggest influences in my life, they weren’t events. They were people. In general, it’s not going to be a Sunday service or a book that you read or a leadership retreat that propels you to the next level of leadership or spiritual growth. The influence of those around you prepares the foundation on which you will build your ministry.

Rhythms

The second thing I’m learning is that I’ve got to establish some rhythms in my life. I approach most of my ministry like I’m trying to steal second base; I put my head to the ground and break into a (sometimes premature) sprint and charge as fast as I can to the target with no regard for the people or other things happening in my environment.

This is an area of pride for me. If I am pulling all nighters and cranking out lots of materials and projects, then I feel good. If I end the year with more vacation days than I began, then I feel like I’ve given sacrificially of my time. But it slowly becomes all about me. Establishing healthy rhythms will break the sinful pride in my life.

FOUNDATIONS OF A SMALL-GROUP LEADER

Rhythms will also lay a foundation for a sustainable pace. Paul told Timothy to “fulfill” his ministry. If we want to fulfill our ministry, then we’ve got to find God’s rhythms for us. Not the rhythms of those we admire. Not the rhythms of those we envy. The rhythms that are unique to us and our relationship with God.

What am I talking about? Prayer—what role does that play in our lives? Reading the Word—when do we do it and why do we do it, and are we obeying what we are learning? Solitude—are we intentionally taking time to be alone with God? Sleep—God doesn’t have to sleep; we do. Let’s recognize that and quit trying to be God.

Character

I’m learning more and more that character is about transformation, not information. I cannot “train” myself intellectually into a person of good character. Rather, it’s rooted in every decision I make every day. All those decisions add up to produce my character.

I’m also coming to the realization that the spiritual fruits are more important than spiritual gifts. That’s a hard one for me to get through my head. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:2, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Did you catch that? I am *nothing*. The fruit allows us to use our gifts appropriately, powerfully, and efficiently.

We may want to direct a little more attention to how spiritual fruit is developing in our lives.

Purpose

I’m learning that I need to consistently come back to questions of purpose. What am I supposed to be doing? There are probably a number of people who have an agenda for your life—bosses, parents, teachers, friends, etc. If you don’t prioritize, they will do it for you.

As we grow in leadership, our opportunities will grow, so we need to make sure we remain focused on the things that God has called us to do. We need to say yes to the things that move us towards fulfilling our purpose and no to the things that don’t. I’m learning that I need to pass every decision through a filter: is this in line with what God wants me to do? Jesus did not fulfill the purposes that other people had for him. He fulfilled one purpose and one alone: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

Legacy

Finally, I am realizing that I must have some idea of what kind of structure I want to build in order to lay a foundation that will sustain it. I realize we are all young, but it’s never too early to think about your legacy. (It’s never too late, either, by the way.)

Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, “Death is the destiny of every man; the living should take that to heart.” The Living Bible says it this way, “You are going to die and it is a good thing to think about it while there is still time.”

To put it in theatrical terms, it’s good to think now about the following:

- Character Development—who do I want to become?
- The Plot—whose life will be impacted by mine?
- Climax—how will the world change because I lived?

At a retreat I lead for our group leaders last spring, we began by having everyone write out their epitaph. Here lies _____ who _____. Not a happy way to begin a retreat, huh? But it gives us perspective. It helps us lead with the end in mind and helps us lay a foundation that is solid and lasting.

— HEATHER ZEMPEL; is Pastor of Discipleship at National Community Church in Washington, D.C., copyright 2009. Used with permission of National Community Church.

Discuss:

1. In which of the five areas listed above am I currently doing the best?
2. In which of the five areas do I need the most help and encouragement?
3. What else is on my mind as I consider how to build a solid foundation for myself as a small-group leader, and for my group?



Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you lay an effective foundation for ministry.

SmallGroups.com. Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International.

- [Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide](#)
- [Small-Group Facilitator Orientation Guide](#)
- [Go Deeper with God](#) — Practical Ministry Skills

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Creating Community by Andy Stanley and Bill Willits. Stanley and Willits unveil the principles that have connected more than 8,000 people in small groups (Multnomah Publishers, 2004; ISBN 978-1590523962).

Making Small Groups Work by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. In this book, facilitators will learn God's plan for growth and how to promote it; what makes a group work; the roles of members; and how to find solutions for problems (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310250289).

Successful Small Groups: From Concept to Practice by Teena M. Stewart. A solid and practical book that covers all the bases (Beacon Hill Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0834122373).

The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community by Randy Frazee. This book paints a beautiful portrait of biblical community and talks about the sacrifices we will have to make in order to experience life together (Zondervan, 2000; ISBN 978-0310233084).

Why Didn't You Warn Me? by Pat J. Sikora. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).