

<http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/seekerfriendly.html?start=3>

The screenshot shows the website www.smallgroups.com with the article title "Seeker-Friendly Small Groups". The page features a navigation bar with "CHRISTIANITY TODAY" and various ministry links. A search bar is visible, and there are several buttons for "START", "TRAIN", "LEAD", "CONNECT", "ORGANIZE", "BLOG", and "STORE". The article content area is partially visible, showing the beginning of the text.

Seeker-Friendly Small Groups

Effectively receiving truth-seekers

[Reid Smith](#) | posted 1/16/2012

Small groups enable people to apply biblical learning to life. They also present opportunities for members to engage in mission with their surrounding community. In fact, small groups present wonderful opportunities for blending believers with those who have yet to believe.

Groups that experience the greatest growth tend to be those that have a mixture of people in different places spiritually. Therefore, it is important for small-group leaders to know how they can welcome spiritual seekers and nurture their sense of belonging. The more group leaders know how to engage and encourage truth-seeking guests, the more effective they will be in connecting the Good News with those looking for truth.

For the sake of this article, I am defining a seeker as someone who is in the process of seeking truth, but has not made the decision to follow Christ. A believer, on the other hand, is someone who has found the truth and decided to commit their lives to following Jesus.

Here are some practical tips to receive seekers and build relationships with them.

The First Night

Have an Open Group Policy

Small groups provide so many opportunities for outreach. So let regular members know you want them to invite friends. This attitude is one of the greatest contributing factors to a group making an evangelistic impact. If your group is in a season or study that is less conducive to having newcomers join in, it's okay to be a closed group for a time. It is always good, however, for group members to know they are commissioned and encouraged to invite their seeking friends.

Warmly Welcome Seekers

Learn a little about your guests as you greet them and walk them into your gathering space. Do your best to remember facts they share about themselves, their family and friends, and how they found your group. One of the simplest and most powerful ways to help newcomers feel at home in your group is to call them by their names each time you refer to them.

Connect Them with Others

As seekers come in, connect them with other group members and help strike up conversation before your study begins. This is when your memory recall comes into play. Use what you know about them to ignite conversations with other group members. If they have been invited by a group member, the group member can serve as their "buddy" for the evening, helping them feel welcome and connected.

Briefly Introduce Them

Introduce seekers to your group at the outset of your gathering using what you learned about them. Don't ask your spiritually-seeking guests to talk in front of the whole group. Let them initiate sharing if they are comfortable. Just do what you naturally do each group meeting and let them chime in as they see fit.

Consider Them Seekers

Believers who are new to a Christian gathering tend to talk about their faith or church commitment. If your guests don't mention their faith or church involvement, chances are they either don't have a relationship with God or don't have a strong one. It is vitally important to avoid making assumptions about what your guests believe. Rather, look for ways to affirm the truth God has apparently given to them as Paul did in Athens (Acts 17:22-23, 28-29).

Introduce the Group Structure

Most people prefer to get a good feel of the group dynamic before jumping into the discussion. Take a minute at the beginning of the meeting to say what your group is about. Invite input from others so guests can catch a glimpse of the other personalities present. If your guests feel free to participate, they're more likely to return.

Allow Time to Socialize

Everybody is different, but newcomers tend to be more interested in socializing toward the end of a group than the beginning. When you have guests, leave plenty of time for people to socialize at the tail-end of your meeting. This will give time to introduce your group members to your guests and have fun and relaxed conversations.

End on a High Note

Studies show that experiences which end positively create good memories. And if you're left with a good memory, you'll probably want to repeat the experience. End on an encouraging high note so guests are more likely to return.

As They Attend the Group

Watch Your Language

During your study and discussion time, use relational terms to explain theological concepts. For example, salvation is having a relationship with Christ or being friends with God now and forever. Redemption is Jesus helping us to connect with God and know him. Do your best to stay away from Christian jargon.

Express Appreciation for Their Input

Be sure to thank seekers for sharing. It will encourage them to continue doing so. When seekers say something that does not harmonize with Scripture, do not immediately correct them, especially during their initial gatherings with your group. Be positive and say something like, "I appreciate your thoughts. Thanks for sharing!" Discipleship happens through relationships that develop over time.

Don't Over-Accommodate

Do not hesitate to pray or worship in your group if newcomers or seekers are present. Sometimes this is exactly what God uses to gather lost people to himself (Acts 2:46-47). If somebody needs prayer, pray for them. If you are going to worship, just do it. Don't attempt to explain it for seekers. They want to see things how they really are and would rather not have you disrupt the flow of what you normally do on their account. After the meeting offer to explain anything they have questions about.

Don't Put Them on the Spot

Most guests like to be acknowledged. They don't, however, like to stand out or be spotlighted in front of a group, so don't focus on them. If you keep things normal, the group will feel more natural and comfortable to newcomers.

Express Solidarity with Seekers

When your group prays together, thank God for everyone present and for how he is meeting every person right where they are in their spiritual journeys. Then punctuate your prayer by asking the Lord to allow everyone to help one another take their next steps closer to Jesus Christ. What you are doing is putting everyone on equal-footing and entrusting each person to the Lord.

Connect with the Seekers' Interests

Find out what subjects your truth-seeking guests enjoy talking about. Seekers will feel more empowered and comfortable talking about the things of interest to them. If you listen attentively, you will show that you are genuinely interested in them and they will not feel like a project.

Express Your Commitment to the Community

Be sure to talk about how the group would like to make a difference in your community. This allows you to revisit your group's commitment to outreach and shows seekers that your group is:

- Outward-thinking. This helps guests feel safer because it makes the communal nature of the group feel less cliquish and more caring.
- Serious about making a commitment to share God's love and grace to a waiting world. People want their lives to make a positive impact on others. This helps them see that your small group can help toward this goal, making group time a worthwhile investment of their time.

Don't Offer Advice

Don't offer advice for how your seeking guests can grow. That might sound funny for those who like to be helpful, but some people might interpret your advice as homework and think you will be checking up with them at the next meeting. You might be surprised how giving advice inhibits people from returning, especially if they did not act on your advice.

Reflect on the Meeting

After the meeting, write down facts about your guests or prayer requests they shared. Reflect on what went well and what seemed to make them uncomfortable. Brainstorm ways to revisit prayer requests and common interests in future conversations. This will show you were listening and that you care, which has a powerful effect in drawing guests into your group.

Outside the Meeting

Connect Outside of Group

Commit to calling, e-mailing, or meeting with the seekers during the week. Or, if they came with another member, have the group member follow up. Let them know you really hope to see them again. Unless they have a friend who brought them, make yourself available to talk anytime. Sometimes group leaders are afraid of being intrusive or coming across as pushy. Guests appreciate this act of kindness, and it makes your group more inviting. If you do not risk the remote possibility of coming across as intrusive, seekers may feel like you don't want them to come back.

Help Build Relationships

Research has shown the possibility of a visitor joining a church is reduced by at least 50 percent with each passing week. This trend also holds true for small groups and can be inverted by the same proportion if guests experience the hope of developing healthy friendships. In other words, the likelihood of seekers returning increases by at least 50 percent if they experience a sense of belonging through their connection with others. This can be cultivated by highlighting things your truth-seeking guests hold in common with other group members and by having group members connect with seekers outside of meetings. It could be as simple as a quick e-mail or text message.

A Reminder to Groups

A group that's open and welcoming to visitors is filled with life-giving possibilities. By following the recommendations above, you will create an environment where the hospitality of biblical community will reach many truth-searchers for Christ.

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