EVERYONE BELONGS

The Small Group Leader's Guide to Confidence Across Ages, Cultures, and Incomes



URBAN THEOLOGIANS

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This book offers general guidance for small-group leaders. It is not professional counseling, legal advice, or medical advice. When someone in your group is in crisis, involve your pastor and qualified professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Toronto, in a city where it felt like every ethnicity lived on the same few blocks. When I moved to the United States for a track scholarship, I was surprised by how many people seemed to want to be around only people who looked and thought like them.

That surprise turned into a calling. I became passionate about building bridges between races, cultures, and classes, because I believe we see more of who God is when we do. Following Jesus isn't for any one group of people. It's for anyone who calls on his name.

I have spent years leading small groups, and later leading the people who lead them. I've led groups that felt like a gift, with people from different countries, backgrounds, and walks with God, who ended up serving their city together. I've also led a group that felt impossible, where I went to bed baffled night after night. I've done this well, and I've done it poorly. This book comes out of both.

Most of the guidance for small-group leaders assumes a fairly uniform room. But the rooms most of us actually lead are not uniform. They include people of different ages, cultures, and incomes, with very different histories with church. Leaders are often told to "just be authentic," as if that were enough. It isn't, because authenticity means different things to different people.

This book offers something more specific. It's built around one idea I call Kingdom culture: the way of life God calls all of us into (Exodus 20), which is bigger than any one culture. When a group aims at Kingdom culture, nobody has to shrink to fit someone else's way of doing things, and everyone, including the leader, has room to grow.

You'll find practical guidance on how to read your room, how to set up the shape of your group, why the table matters so much, how generations, cultures, and classes experience a group differently, how to ask questions and handle silence, how to lead prayer, how to repair what breaks, and how to stay teachable. The final chapter gathers scripts and checklists you can use right away.

You don't need to read the book in order, though the early chapters lay the foundation for the later ones. At the end of each chapter, there are a few questions to help you think about your own group.

A few honest notes. I'm one voice, and I don't speak for any group of people. The patterns I describe come from my own experience leading groups, shaped by Scripture, and they aren't rules about any person. Treat them as things to watch for, and always ask people about themselves rather than assuming. And you will make mistakes, as I have. Keep going.

If you're willing to sit at a table with people who aren't like you, and to let Jesus shape all of you together, you're already ready to begin.

EVERYONE BELONGS

CHAPTER 1

WHY "JUST BE AUTHENTIC" FAILS IN A MIXED ROOM

Someone in my first small group once asked, in the middle of a discussion, "What is grace?"

The room got quiet. Everyone else in that circle had been in church long enough that the word felt like furniture. We used it constantly and never explained it. She had almost no Bible background and wasn't embarrassed to ask. That one question changed how I talked for the next two years.

I'm telling you this up front because it is the heart of this book. Leading a group is hard enough when everyone shares the same background. It gets harder, and also much better, when they don't.

The advice everyone gives

When you say yes to leading a small group, somebody will tell you to "just be authentic." Be yourself. Be real. Be vulnerable. Don't worry about technique.

I believe in all of that. I'm not going to tell you to be fake. But I have learned that this advice assumes something: that everyone in the room hears "authentic" the same way you do.

They don't.

Authenticity is shaped by how you grew up, how your family handled conflict, what church meant in your home, whether money was ever tight, and what generation you belong to. What feels honest and warm to you may feel pushy to one person, cold to another, and confusing to a third.

So when you "just be yourself" in a mixed room, you are not being neutral. You are speaking your own language and hoping everyone can translate. Some will. Many won't, and they probably won't tell you.

Instead, here's what I'd tell you. Be yourself, but aim the group at Kingdom culture, the way of life God calls all of us into, instead of aiming it at your own culture.

When the leader's culture is the target, somebody in the room has to shrink to fit. When Kingdom culture is the target, everyone in the room, including you, has some growing to do. I'll explain what I mean by that in Chapter 2.

What I got right the first time

My wife and I had been in groups at our church that were either mostly white or mostly Black, even though the church hoped to become more multiethnic. I had been in groups led by two different pastors, and both of them taught me a lot. What neither group taught me was how to adjust when different kinds of people showed up.

So I didn't wait for the church to hand me a list of names. I recruited the first members myself, and I chose people I already knew, who didn't look or live like each other. A dating couple who sat near us on Sundays, one of whom was unsure about the church. A woman I had served alongside in another ministry who had never landed in a group, though she'd been around for years. An old friend from college who didn't go to any church. Two women who were curious about Jesus but had almost no Bible knowledge. A family where one of the parents had grown up with very little and never felt they fit the clean-cut image they believed our church had.

I asked each of them directly, one at a time. Every one of them said yes.

That group became one of the sweetest I've ever been part of. They served together in a way that grew into the church's outreach ministry. The men met on Saturday mornings for years. People grew closer to God and to each other in ways I didn't plan and couldn't have scripted.



Looking back, I got a few things right without fully knowing why. I started with relationships. I invited people personally. And I was willing to let the question "What is grace?" stop the room.

What I got wrong the second time

After that group, my wife and I developed a reputation. People said we could disciple anyone. The church started sending us people who weren't working out elsewhere, and others recommended us to friends who were struggling.

Our second group was full of people who were carrying very heavy things. Many were hurt by the church. Many weren't anchored in faith yet. Several were in the middle of crises that would have demanded a leader's full attention on their own. I was trying to share the gospel, help some people hold on to Jesus, and check on others who barely got a chance to speak, all in the same ninety minutes.

It was one of the hardest groups I have ever led. I went home baffled, week after week. I had just led a group that felt like a gift, and now I was leading one that felt impossible.

It wasn't the diversity that sank us. The mix of backgrounds wasn't the problem. The problem was that I had no way to read the room, no structure to protect the quieter voices, and no limits on how much one group could carry. I leaned on my personality and my reputation. That wasn't enough.

This book is partly what I wish I'd had before that group.

One moment, three different rooms

Let me show you what I mean. Picture a simple moment in group: you ask a question, and nobody answers.

- **In one room,** the silence means people are thinking. They are being respectful and want to give the question its due. If you rush in to fill it, you take their thinking time away.

- **In another room,** the silence means people are unsure whether it's their place to speak first. Maybe an older member is present, and younger members are waiting to see what the older person says. Maybe the person with the most formal education is present, and others don't want to risk sounding foolish. If you wait longer, you only make that tension heavier.

- **In a third room,** the silence means people are afraid of getting it wrong. They didn't grow up with a Bible in the house, and the question assumes knowledge they don't have. Waiting won't help. They need a different kind of question.

The same silence has three meanings, and each calls for a different move from you. The advice to just be yourself offers no help in telling them apart.

Prayer requests work the same way. In one group, a vivid, detailed request is a gift of trust. In another, it feels like airing private business. In a third, a person who has little money may hold back because they worry their need will turn the group's attention toward their situation.



None of these people are wrong. They are just different, and they are all sitting in the same circle.

What this book will and won't do

This book is not a theory of diversity, and it isn't trying to settle every debate about race, class, or culture in the church. There are other books for that.

It is a practical guide for the person who has said yes to leading a group and who suspects the room will be more mixed than they were trained for. It will help you:

- Figure out who is actually in your room without stereotyping anyone
- Set up the structure and the table so that more kinds of people feel at home
- Understand some of the differences across generations, cultures, and income levels that shape a group
- Adjust your questions, your silences, and your prayer times
- Recover when something goes wrong, and something will
- Notice your own blind spots and stay teachable

I'm writing from experience, including the experiences I'd rather not repeat. I led groups that worked and groups that didn't. I later led leaders in a college ministry where students carrying hard histories, students who struggled to read, and honor-roll athletes all ended up in the same groups. When that ministry began, the groups were largely divided by race. By the end, nobody wanted to go back.



What I learned is that you don't need to be a perfect leader to lead a mixed group well. You need a few honest habits, a little structure, and a willingness to ask what you may be missing.

Before you move on

Take five minutes and answer these on paper:

1. Who is in your group right now, or who do you hope will be? Write down names.
2. For each person, what do you actually know about how they grew up and what church has meant to them? Where are you guessing?
3. When has someone in your group gone quiet, and what did you assume it meant?



You don't have to do anything with your answers yet. Chapter 2 starts from there.

CHAPTER 2

READING YOUR ROOM

Looking back at my first group, I can tell you exactly why it worked. I asked people on purpose, and I gave each one a reason I thought they would love being there.

Looking back at my second group, I can tell you why it didn't. Those people didn't join because someone invited them with a reason. They landed with us because they were dealing with hard things that others didn't want to deal with.

That is the difference this chapter is about. Before you can lead a mixed group well, you have to know who is in the room. And if you have any say over who joins, you have the chance to shape the group before the first night.

A quick word before we start. Reading your room does not mean sorting people into boxes. It does not mean deciding what someone is like because of their age, skin color, or paycheck. It means paying attention, asking good questions, and staying curious. Everything in this chapter is a way to learn who someone actually is, not a way to guess.

Start with who you're asking

If you're building a group from scratch, you have a rare advantage: you get to choose. Here is what I look for.

1 People who want to follow Jesus more, even if they aren't yet.

You don't need a room full of seasoned believers. Some of the best members I've had barely knew the Bible. What I look for is an openness, a pull toward Jesus, even if it's faint. That is different from someone who is curious about community but not interested in Jesus at all.

Here's the practical rule I've learned the hard way: if you invite people who don't yet know Jesus, don't put too many of them in one group. A few is a gift. They ask the questions the rest of us have stopped asking, like "What is grace?" and "Who is David?" A room made up mostly of people who are still deciding whether any of this is for them is a room where the leader ends up doing apologetics every week, with little left over for anything else. That's not the group's fault. It just means the balance matters.

This isn't me saying some people don't belong. Everyone belongs in the church. It's me saying a single group is one tool, and it can only carry so much. Some people have a lot of questions, and those questions deserve answers, but a small group isn't the place to answer all of them.

2 People who know you love Jesus and his church.

Make it clear, early and in plain words, that you love Jesus and you love his church. Don't assume people will pick that up.

This matters most for the people who have been hurt by church. They are watching for whether you're defending an institution or following a person. When they see that you love Jesus, and that you love the church in spite of its flaws, it gives them room to say what they actually feel.

Over the years, I've had people come to group who wanted the community but weren't sure they wanted Jesus. I understood. Many of them had been through a lot. But when I wasn't clear from the start about what the group was for, it caused confusion for everyone, and the group could start drifting toward being mostly a place to air grievances with the church.

3 People who want community.

A person has to want to be there. Not everyone does, and that's okay. Someone who is joining only because a pastor suggested it, or because a friend begged them, will often drift. Ask about it directly: "Is community something you've been looking for?" Their answer tells you a lot.

4 People who get along with others, not only with you.

This is easy to miss. You will naturally invite people you click with. But your group is not made of you and everyone else. It's made of every relationship in the circle. Ask yourself: can this person sit next to someone very different from them and stay warm? Will they listen? Will they let someone else finish a thought?

Some of my best members weren't the ones I connected with fastest. They were the ones who connected with everyone. This can also go wrong when you invite too many big talkers into one group. Only one person can talk at a time, so everyone else has to listen. A group can end up with three or four people who dominate every night, and as the leader you lose track of where everyone else is.

One person is not a diverse group

I wish every leader understood this.

One diverse person does not make a diverse group.

If you have ten people from one background and one person from another, you haven't built a mixed room. You've built a room with a guest. That one person ends up carrying the whole weight: explaining their community, adjusting to everyone else's customs, and being asked what "people like them" think. It's a lot to ask of anyone. This can happen with age, ethnicity, life stage, and many other differences. Diversity isn't the goal in itself, but you do need to be aware of the pressure some people may feel.

The more variety you have, the easier it gets. The reason is simple. When the group is varied enough, no single culture can run the show. You can't lean on anyone's background as the default, because there isn't one. What's left is the only culture that can hold everyone: Kingdom culture.

That's what happened in my first group. We had people from different countries, different backgrounds, and very different walks with the Lord. Nobody could treat their own way as the normal way. So we had to learn each other, and in the end we learned Jesus' way together.

What I mean by Kingdom culture

I've used the phrase "Kingdom culture" a few times now, so let me say plainly what I mean by it.

Kingdom culture is the way of life the Bible calls us into. I believe Exodus 20 is not just a list of rules. It's God telling his people how to flourish as humans. When we follow him, we live out a culture that lets us thrive.

The trouble starts when people take their own worldly culture and treat it as if it were Kingdom culture. Their church traditions, their style of worship, their way of speaking, dressing, or spending time start to feel like "just what Christians do." That's how one group's preferences become everyone's requirements.

The pineapple

I think of culture like a pineapple. Four things happen to it:

- The crown gets cut off. Only Jesus is King. Every culture puts something on the throne, and in Christ only he sits there.
- The skin gets cut off. The skin is sin. It's rough, and you can't eat it.
- The heart gets gutted. Jesus gives us a new heart (Ezekiel 36).
- The fruit stays. The fruit is good. You keep it.

This is why I'm telling you about the pineapple. Every follower of Jesus has to give up the crown and the skin and receive a new heart. But people from minority cultures are often asked to cut out the fruit too. That means parts of their culture that are not sin, parts God redeems for his glory, get treated as if they were. Usually that's because the dominant culture in the room has mistaken its own fruit for the standard.

No culture gets a pass. The majority culture has a crown, skin, a heart, and fruit like any other, and the knife applies to it as well.

The Four Parts *of* Culture

Every culture, like a pineapple, can be transformed by the gospel.
Not everything is good, but not everything is bad.



1 The Crown

ONLY JESUS IS KING

The crown reminds us that Jesus alone is King over every culture. He has the right to define what is true, good and beautiful.



2 The Skin

REMOVE WHAT IS SINFUL

The skin represents the sinful elements in a culture that do not honor God. These must be identified and removed.



3 The Heart

RECEIVE A NEW HEART

The heart is the renewed center. Through the gospel, people and cultures can receive a new heart—a new way of thinking, valuing and living.



4 The Fruit

KEEP WHAT IS GOOD

The fruit represents the good and valuable elements in a culture that can be preserved and used for God's purposes.

Preserve and use the valuable, redeemable parts of culture for God's glory.

What this means for you as a leader

When something in your group feels unfamiliar to you, such as how loudly someone prays, how long they take to answer, what they bring to share, or how they greet older members, ask yourself one question before you react:

Is this sin, or is it just different?

If it's just different, it may be fruit. Make room for it. If it's sin, it has to go, and that's true no matter whose culture it comes from. Your job is not to guess by instinct. You'll make mistakes in both directions, so stay humble and keep asking.



A group that does this well becomes a place where everyone is cut and renewed by the same King, and where the good fruit of every background is welcome at the table.

New group or existing group?

It is easier to build a diverse group from the beginning than to bring diversity into an old one.

When a group starts from scratch, it creates its culture together. Everyone arrives at the same time, nobody is the "new person," and the habits form as you go. That's why I always say you have a real advantage at the start.

If you're stepping into a group that already exists, the culture is already there. The jokes, the food, the way people pray and talk are all set. A new person doesn't just join a group. They join someone else's culture. If you want that to work, you have to be deliberate: slow down, introduce people carefully, and ask the long-timers to make space on purpose.

How to learn who's in the room without guessing

Once people are in the room, how do you read it without stereotyping? Here are a few habits.

Ask, and then listen more than you talk. In the first few weeks, have simple conversations with each person, one on one if you can. Ask where they grew up, what church was like for them, what they hope the group will be. Avoid questions that assume things, such as "What does your community think about...?"

Watch for patterns without forming conclusions. Notice who speaks first, who waits, who looks at their phone, who offers to help, who never does. These are clues. Don't treat them as answers. Quiet might mean shy, or respectful, or hurt, or bored. Ask before you decide.

Check your own assumptions. Whenever you catch yourself thinking, "Well, they probably...," stop. That is a guess. Replace it with a question.

Pay attention to what people don't say. Someone who always says they're "fine" may be carrying something. Someone who always has a story may be hiding something else. You don't have to dig. Just notice, and be available.

What to do when the room is more than you can carry

This is what I learned in my second group. Sometimes you read the room and realize it is carrying more than one group can handle.

If that happens, it isn't failure, and it doesn't mean those people don't matter. It means the group needs help. Talk to your pastor. Get others involved. Some people need counseling, recovery programs, or care that a small group can't provide. A small group is a place to belong and grow. It is not a hospital, and you are not their only hope.

You can love people deeply and still say, "This group needs support, and so do you." One of the best things you can do as a leader is recognize when you need help.

Before you move on

1. Write down the people in your group, or the people you hope to invite. Next to each name, write one thing you actually know about them, not something you assume.
2. Look at the list as a whole. Is there one person who stands out as the only one of their kind in the room? What might that be like for them?
3. Count how many people are exploring faith and how many are well-established. Does the balance feel sustainable for you?
4. Pick one person you know the least. Set up a time to ask them the questions above.



In the next chapter we'll talk about the shape of the group itself: how many people, when you meet, and how to build a structure that works for real lives.

CHAPTER 3

THE SHAPE OF YOUR GROUP



My first group grew to twenty people. It was one of the best groups I've ever been part of, but twenty was too big. Looking back, twenty is too many people for one couple to care for well. There were about six people I believe could have been cared for better, but we didn't have the capacity. And it became easy for people who were less committed, or less comfortable, to stay silent.

Because I didn't realize twenty was too many, my second group, full of people walking through hard things, became overwhelming. A couple facing serious problems would stay quiet because someone else always seemed to have a bigger one. In the end, no one was getting the care they really needed.

That's the lesson of this chapter. Good intentions and a warm room are not enough. Structure decides who gets heard, who gets tired, and who slips out the back door. In a mixed room, structure matters even more, because the people who are least likely to speak up are often the ones the structure was never built for.

If Kingdom culture is where you want the group to land, the structure has to make room for it. Structure is not neutral. Every choice about size, time, place, and food carries someone's culture. This chapter is about making those choices on purpose.

Size: 10 to 14 at most

My rule is simple: no more than ten to fourteen people. Twenty is too many, and fewer than eight is usually too few.

In a mixed group, size matters even more. A conversation can only hold so many voices. Past a certain size, a few confident people carry the night, and the rest listen. In a room full of people from different backgrounds, the ones who go quiet first are often the newest believers, the people who feel they don't belong, and anyone who grew up learning not to speak first. Those are exactly the voices you most need to hear.

A bigger group also makes it harder for you to know people. You can't check on everyone, remember what each person shared, or notice who stopped coming. Chapter 2 was about reading the room. You can't read a room you can't see.

When you start to push past fourteen, treat that as good news and a signal. It means people want what the group offers. The answer is to start another group, not to squeeze more chairs into the living room.

The rhythm of the night

Our group met on Tuesdays. We ate together for about thirty minutes, and then we met for an hour and a half.

I'd keep that order: food first, then the conversation. People arrive from work, from picking up kids, from long days on their feet. They don't arrive ready to discuss Scripture. Thirty minutes at the table gives everyone time to land, to be fed, and to talk about ordinary life. By the time you sit down to the study, people already know each other a little better than they did an hour ago. I'll say more about the meal in Chapter 4.

Your rhythm may need to look different. Two hours is a long evening for a person who works early, has small children, or relies on someone else for a ride. If your room needs a shorter night, shorten it. Ask people. The goal isn't to copy my schedule. The goal is a rhythm that more kinds of people can say yes to.

Where to meet

We met at our house. I'd recommend a home when you can, for a simple reason: it feels different from a church building. For someone who has been hurt by church, or who has never been inside one, walking into a living room can be far easier than walking into a sanctuary.

A home also has costs, and some of them are easy to miss.

- **It asks something of the host.** Space, cleaning, food, and a family that shares its evening.
- **Not everyone feels comfortable in someone else's home.** A person who has little money, or who is embarrassed by their own living situation, may find a nicer house harder to walk into than a church hall.

- **Some people can't host.** If your group depends on one home, those who can't offer theirs may feel they have nothing to give.

There are options. You can rotate homes, meet in a neutral place like a community room or a restaurant back room, or keep one host home and let others take on other jobs. Whatever you choose, ask yourself: whose comfort is this designed for?

Pick one day and stick with it. People build their lives around a regular night. When the schedule moves around, those with the least flexibility, such as shift workers and single parents, are the first to fall away.

The open door

My wife and I often left our home open late into the night for people who needed to talk.

I don't regret that, even with little kids at home. Some of the most important conversations we had didn't happen in the circle. People who couldn't say what was really going on in front of twelve others would say it at eleven o'clock at the kitchen table. For some members, the late night was where the group became real.

Our group stood out to people because it never felt like an agenda to get through before showing everyone the door. Staying open kept us relational and made people feel loved.

But I'd offer a caution. An open door is a gift, and it also costs the people behind it. If you're the only one who stays up, you will eventually run out. If you have a spouse, you're asking them to carry it too.

A few ways to keep it healthy:

- **Decide it on purpose.** Don't let it drift into something you resent. Agree with your spouse or co-leader how late you'll stay and how often.

- **Share it.** If a second leader can be the person who stays on a given night, the door stays open without burning you out.

- **Know your limit.** A late-night conversation is not counseling. If someone needs more than a listening ear, point them to your pastor or another qualified person, as we discussed in Chapter 2.

Who leads

A group of ten to fourteen mixed people needs more than one pair of hands. Think of the work as a few separate jobs: someone to host, someone to lead the conversation, someone to coordinate food, and someone to follow up with people who miss a week.

You don't have to fill each job with a different person, but you do want to share them. A leadership team that reflects the group tells everyone in it, "This is ours, not just the leader's." When all the jobs go to people of one background, the group learns whose culture is in charge.

One of the biggest mistakes in group leadership is thinking the leader has to do everything. That isn't how the church works. The body of Christ isn't meant to be one pastor running around doing it all. Instead, leaders equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12).



In one of the first groups my wife was ever part of, she offered to take a job off the pastor's hands: coming up with a theme for the potluck each week. He was thankful, and a decade later she still enjoys doing it. No matter how small the role, people should know they have one.

Open or closed, and when to pause

Two more decisions are worth making on purpose.

Open or closed. An open group welcomes new people any time. A closed group stays with its original members for a set season. Open groups are easier to join, but a newcomer steps into a culture that already exists, and that is harder than starting together (Chapter 2). Closed groups build trust faster but can turn inward. Many leaders open the door at the beginning of a season and close it after a few weeks.

Seasons with natural stopping points. Build in places where people can pause, rest, or leave gracefully, such as a break between seasons or a conversation at the end of a few weeks. People are more willing to commit when they can see the end of the commitment. It also gives you a gentle way to invite someone to a different group if the fit isn't right.

You may not have to make this decision yourself. Your church may already have a process, so check with whoever leads groups. In our church, groups are closed unless they send out new leaders. Then the group can add two more people, and it takes a lot of intentionality to bring someone new into a group that has already built strong bonds.

Designing for real lives

Before you settle your structure, think about the real lives that will walk through your door.

- **Work schedules.** Can someone who works nights or has rotating shifts still come?
- **Children.** Is there a plan for kids, or does a parent have to choose between group and childcare?
- **Transportation.** Does everyone have a way to get there, and a way home?
- **Cost.** Does anyone have to buy something, bring something, or pay for something to belong? We'll come back to this in Chapter 7.



You don't have to solve every problem. You just have to ask the questions before the group starts, not after someone disappears.

Before you move on

1. What is your ideal group size, and what will you do when you pass it?
2. Walk through your plan for the night. Who is it built for? Who might it leave out?
3. If you have an open door, how late and how often, and who shares it with you?
4. Name the four jobs (host, conversation, food, follow-up). Who could hold each one?



In the next chapter we'll sit down at the table and talk about food, because eating together does more work than most leaders realize.

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CHAPTER 4

THE TABLE

One night we picked "Biblical foods" as the theme. Nobody signed up to bring a protein. My wife looked at the table, went and made bacon, and announced that it was the demon-possessed pigs Jesus drove off the cliff.

People laughed so hard that nobody remembered what the passage was supposed to be about that night. But I remember what it did for the group. It made us feel like a family.

That's what food does. In a mixed group, it does more than almost anything else you can plan, and most leaders treat it as an afterthought. This chapter is about why the table matters, how to run it so it welcomes everyone, and why our group never met without a potluck.

Why the table matters

When people from different backgrounds sit in a circle with Bibles open, the first few minutes can feel stiff. Everyone is guarding something. Nobody knows yet what's safe to say.

When those same people stand around a table passing dishes, the guard comes down. They ask each other, "What is this? Did you make it? Where did your family get this recipe?" Those are easy questions, and they open doors that a discussion question can't.

The early church knew this. They broke bread together in their homes (Acts 2:46), and it was part of how they became a family. Kingdom culture has always had a table in it. When you want a group of people from different worlds to become one body, feed them first.

This is why, in Chapter 3, I told you to put the meal before the study. We ate for thirty minutes and then met for an hour and a half. By the time we opened the Bible, people had already started to know each other.

Why a potluck

Our meals were always potlucks. I'd recommend that to you, for one reason above all.

The beauty of a potluck is that you can come with one thing and leave with a full plate. That is how the body of Christ works. You come with one gift, and sometimes with nothing, and you leave filled because of Jesus.

I think that's one of the clearest pictures of church we have. Nobody brings everything, and nobody leaves empty. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that each part has something to give, and that no part can say to another, "I don't need you." A potluck puts that on a table.

One night we did an Italian theme, and for whatever reason it excited everyone so much that they brought far more than we could eat. Everybody took food home. People who came with a single dish left with enough for the next day. Nobody planned that. It was just what happens when people give freely.

The honest part: you need a few anchors

I have to tell you something that doesn't make it into most potluck advice.

Everyone in our group was asked to contribute, but in reality we needed about three family units we could count on to bring a decent meal every week. Those families brought the main dish. Everyone else brought sides, drinks, and desserts, and it worked.

If you leave a potluck completely to chance, you will end up with eleven bags of chips and no dinner. A few dependable anchors make the whole thing work. A few things to keep in mind:

- **Choose your anchors privately.** Ask them one on one. Don't announce to the room, "Who here can cook a real meal?" That makes everyone else feel measured.

- **Don't let it fall on the same families every week.** If the same three families carry the main dish for months, they'll burn out, or they'll start to feel the group takes them for granted. Rotate when you can.

- **Watch the cost.** A main dish for a dozen people isn't cheap. Don't assume every family can afford to host a meal, even if they're willing. Chapter 7 will come back to this, and one option is a small shared fund or help from your church.

- **Set the culture.** It's amazing to watch: when people see others contribute and the potluck is good, more people want to get involved. You have to teach people how to potluck well.

- **Don't be discouraged.** If your first few potlucks are sad, keep casting vision for why the table matters.

Nobody should feel shame at the table

The point of a potluck is that everyone can take part. So make it hard to fail.

Store-bought is fine. A bag of ice is fine. A two-liter of soda is fine. Bringing nothing at all is fine. Say that out loud early on, in the first week or two, so no one has to guess.

A person who comes with nothing is not a burden on the group. They are part of the picture. The same grace that fills them at the table is the grace that meets them in the study.

When you take sign-ups, ask for categories, not specifics. "Sides, drinks, desserts, or just yourself" is easier to answer than "What are you bringing?" Keep the question light.



Most groups have people who come straight from work some nights. What a blessing that they can just show up and eat. Rejoice that your group gets to bless someone that way.

Themes: how a meal becomes a conversation

Every week our group had a food theme. We did Italian night, childhood favorites, recipes you've been wanting to try, breakfast for dinner, and Biblical foods (more ideas listed below).

Themes do something quiet and important. They answer the question that keeps people from showing up: "What am I supposed to bring?" They also turn the meal into a conversation. A "childhood favorites" night invites every person to explain what they grew up eating, and that tells a story about where they come from.

In a mixed group, that's a gift. Each person gets to bring the fruit of their own culture to the table, and everyone else gets to taste it. This is the pineapple from Chapter 2. Food is some of the best fruit any culture has, and a themed potluck is a way to say, "Bring it. We want it."

A few cautions:

- **Invite, don't assign.** Don't ask someone to bring "their ethnic food" as if they were the group's representative. Let people choose to share a family dish, and let them tell the story if they want to.
- **Avoid turning culture into a costume.** A themed night should honor what people bring. It shouldn't become a tour of other people's cultures for the entertainment of everyone else.
- **Let the theme-maker be someone else.** Ask a member to pick the theme each week, which leads us to the next point.



Some theme ideas beyond the ones listed: a dish from your grandmother's table, comfort food, something from where you grew up, a dish with a story, or a potluck where everyone brings a recipe card to swap.

Give everyone a role

In Chapter 3, I said the leader shouldn't try to do everything, and I told you about my wife taking over the potluck themes. The table is one of the easiest places to practice that. No matter how small the role is, people should know they have one.

Hosting, picking the theme, setting up, cleaning up, coordinating who brings what: these are all jobs. Spread them out, and make sure the same people aren't always washing dishes. When everyone has a job, the table belongs to everyone.

Food needs: ask early

A potluck only works if everyone can eat something. Early in the group, ask a simple question: "Are there any food allergies, health needs, or religious or personal restrictions we should know about?"

Then make it easy. Label dishes with the main ingredients. Make sure there's always something on the table that everyone can eat. You don't need to turn the evening into a health seminar. A card next to each dish and one thoughtful question at the start will cover most of it. For anything serious, ask the person what they need instead of guessing.

When a full meal isn't realistic

Sometimes a potluck won't work. Maybe people are coming straight from work, money is tight for most of the group, or space is limited. That's okay. The goal is shared food, not a particular menu.

Some alternatives: a simple snack table, a soup night where one household makes a big pot and everyone adds bread or toppings, rotating who provides the main dish, or a small fund through your church to help with the cost. A bowl of soup shared by people who know each other beats a feast with an awkward silence.

Before you move on

1. Who are your three or so dependable anchors? How will you ask them privately?
2. What will you say in the first weeks so that someone who brings nothing feels completely welcome?
3. Pick a first theme. How could it invite people's stories without putting anyone on the spot?
4. Who could take over choosing the theme or coordinating food, so you aren't doing it alone?



In the next chapter we'll look at generational differences: how people of different ages hear leadership, use Scripture, and understand commitment, and what the younger people in my outreach ministry taught me about loving a neighbor.

CHAPTER 5

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

When I led our outreach ministry, I gave volunteers one instruction above all the others: eat with the people who come. Don't just serve them.

Here's why. When you serve someone a meal and walk away, you are saying, "I have, and you don't." When you sit down and eat with them, you are saying, "We're in this together." People can feel the difference within about five minutes.

I learned that in a neighborhood outreach ministry, and I learned it by watching two generations respond to it very differently. That's what this chapter is about. Generational differences in a small group are real, and they are not a problem to fix. They're a gift to understand.

What I saw

Our outreach ministry fed people who needed a meal a few times a week. For a long time it never settled into a rhythm with volunteers. Then I began leading the college ministry as well, and many of those students wanted to get involved. Those nights became the best and smoothest nights we had.

Here is what I noticed.

The younger students understood why we should care about the city. They understood why the church should get outside its walls, why diversity matters, and why we should care about the poor. They didn't need a long argument. They wanted to show up. Some of them couldn't have explained it from Scripture, but they were there anyway. And when we did show them the Bible, it made them want to show up even more.

Many of the older people in our church needed it explained. Even when we laid it out biblically, getting them to show up felt like pulling teeth.

The meal made it plain. Many of the older volunteers couldn't bring themselves to sit down and eat free food alongside the people we were serving. They worried about how it would look to be seen eating a free meal. The college students loved it. They sat down, ate, and built real friendships. It changed the culture of the whole ministry. There was no more "us and them." There were just people made in the image of God enjoying a meal together.

A caution before we go further

I need to be careful here, and I want you to be careful too.

What I just described is what I saw in one church, in one season. It is not a law of nature. Plenty of older believers lead the way in serving their neighbors, and plenty of younger people are hesitant, distracted, or suspicious of church. If you walk into your group assuming that all older people will resist and all younger people will jump in, you have stopped reading the room and started stereotyping it.

So take my story as a pattern to watch for, not a prediction. The rest of this chapter is about how to notice what is true in your own group.

What the research says

My story is one church's story. Here is how it compares with what surveys have found. Keep in mind that these studies use different definitions and different groups of people, so the numbers aren't directly comparable.

- **Younger adults are volunteering at church at higher rates.** Barna's 2025 State of the Church research, done with Gloo, estimated that about 24% of U.S. adults volunteer at church weekly. Gen Z (21%) and Millennials (19%) were well ahead of Gen X (11%), Elders (12%), and Boomers (9%). Barna described these figures as preliminary [1].

- **The same pattern shows up outside church.** In a Barna study of generosity, 54% of Gen Z adults said they had volunteered for an organization in the past three months, compared with 21% of Boomers [2].

- **Pastors are noticing too.** In a 2026 Barna survey, 45% of senior pastors said engagement had risen among Gen Z at their church, and 42% said the same about Millennials. Most said Boomers and Gen X had stayed about the same [3].

- **Life stage matters.** Barna cautions that younger adults often have less money, so they may lean toward giving time instead of dollars [4].

- **Older adults serve a lot, too.** Federal volunteering data show that older Americans put in more hours per volunteer than any other group. In 2014, the median volunteer aged 65 to 74 gave 81 hours, and those 75 and older gave more than 100 [5].

So what I saw fits a broader pattern, but it isn't the whole picture. The numbers describe averages, not your neighbor. And they show that many older believers serve faithfully, often for more hours and in different settings than younger volunteers. The better question isn't "Who is willing?" It's "What kind of service has this person actually been invited into, and did anyone ask them personally?"

What might be going on

I don't know all the reasons why the older volunteers held back. I can only offer questions to ask, not answers to assume.

- **What did church mean to them growing up?** Many were taught that ministry happens inside the building, and nobody ever told them otherwise.

- **What does it cost them?** Time, energy, comfort, and reputation all weigh differently at different stages of life.

- **What are they afraid of?** In my case, it looked like pride. For someone else it might be fear of saying the wrong thing, of being unsafe, or of being embarrassed.

- **What has no one asked them to do?** Sometimes people stay home because nobody has invited them in a way that feels personal.



The point of those questions is to get curious, not to excuse anyone, and not to accuse anyone.

Eat with, don't just serve

This idea carries over directly to your small group.

Every group has a quiet question underneath it: who gives, and who receives? If the older members always host and the younger members always attend, or if the people with more money always bring the main dish and the others always take, then a hierarchy has formed without anyone choosing it. It becomes "we have, and you don't."

Philippians 2 tells us to count others as more significant than ourselves and points us to Jesus, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant. That is how Kingdom culture works. Everyone gives and everyone receives, and nobody is stuck on one side of the table.

So in your group, look for ways to make giving and receiving go both directions:

- Ask older members to share what they've learned, and ask younger members to share what they're seeing.
- Let members of every age host, bring food, lead a question, or pray.
- Don't let any one generation become the group's helpers or the group's project.
- People naturally drift toward others in the same life stage. Do all you can to push back against that.

Four places generations often differ

Here are four areas where I've seen generations talk past each other. I've kept these as questions, because I don't want to hand you stereotypes dressed up as facts.

- **How people communicate.** Some of your members want a phone call. Some want a text. Some want to be asked in person. If you send a text to someone who prefers a call, they may not read it as personal. Ask each person, "What's the best way to reach you?"

- **How people see authority.** For some, a title or an office carries weight. For others, trust has to be earned, and a title doesn't earn it. Pay attention to who is expected to speak first and who is expected to defer.

- **How people use Scripture and technology.** Some members bring a printed Bible with years of notes in the margins. Others read from a phone. Neither is more spiritual. Give people room to use what they have, and be sure no one feels judged for it.

- **What "commitment" means.** For one person, commitment means never missing a Tuesday. For another, it means showing up fully when they're there and being honest when they can't come. If you assume everyone shares your definition, you'll misread people who care deeply. In Chapter 3, we talked about building seasons and off-ramps into the group. That helps here.

The pineapple in every generation

This is where Kingdom culture does the work.

Every generation has skin that needs to come off. For some it's pride, which kept those volunteers from sitting down at the table. For others it might be impatience, cynicism toward anything with an institution attached, or a habit of walking away when it gets hard. No age group gets to say, "My way is the Christian way."

Every generation also has fruit. The older members of your group may carry steadiness, a long memory of God's faithfulness, and the wisdom of having seen hard seasons. The younger members may carry a hunger to act, a sense of justice, and a willingness to sit down at the table without worrying about how it looks. Both are fruit, and both belong at the table.

Your job as the leader is not to pick a winner. It's to help each generation lose what Jesus is cutting away and keep what he's redeeming.

Practical moves

- **Pair people across ages** for a task or a prayer partnership, so relationships form that wouldn't otherwise.
- **Explain the why, and don't rely on guilt.** If someone doesn't see the reason for something, show them Scripture and show them people. Don't pressure them.
- **Invite personally.** A text to the whole group is easy to ignore. A personal ask carries weight, as we saw in Chapter 2.
- **Watch for the unspoken jokes.** Eye-rolls about "old people" or "kids these days" slowly teach members whose culture is welcome.
- **Share the table.** Whatever you're doing as a group, do it with each other, not for each other.

Before you move on

1. Look at the ages in your group. Who gives, and who receives? Is that fixed, or does it move around?
2. Pick one member from a different generation than yours and ask, "What's the best way to reach you, and what do you hope this group is for?"
3. Where in your group might you be assuming what a generation thinks, instead of asking?
4. Name one fruit and one piece of skin you see in your own generation.



In the next chapter we'll turn to ethnic and cultural differences: how people handle directness, disagreement, honor, and worship, and what to do when one person is asked to speak for a whole community.

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CHAPTER 6

ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

I grew up in Toronto, one of the most multiethnic cities in the world. My normal was being around Chinese, Indian, Caribbean, Italian, Korean, Filipino, and so many other cultures. I didn't think of it as diversity. It was just life.

When I was eighteen, I moved to the United States on a track scholarship and landed at a predominantly white school. The thing that shocked me most was the lack of interest in other people. Many people seemed set on being with, and learning from, only those who looked and thought like them.

That moment started something in me. I developed a passion for building bridges between races and ethnicities, because I believe we get a fuller picture of who God is when we do. Following Jesus isn't for any one people. It's for anyone who calls on his name. Revelation 7:9 gives us a picture of the end of the story: people from every nation, tribe, and language, standing together before the throne. If that's where we're headed, our small groups can start practicing now.

When I began leading people who were different from me, I learned a few things, and I made a few mistakes. This chapter shares both.

Before we start

A few honest notes.

I'm one voice. I don't speak for any ethnic group, and neither does anyone in your group. Culture and ethnicity aren't the same thing, and two people from the same background can be very different. Everything here is a set of habits for staying curious, not a guide to what "those people" are like.

Also, this is the chapter where your own humility matters most. You'll get things wrong. Keep reading anyway.

Lesson 1: Name the differences

Don't act like differences aren't there. When you pretend they don't exist, people feel unseen.

One week I came to preach to our college ministry, and I noticed that the students had sorted themselves by race. Black students sat on one side of the room, and white students sat on the other. The best thing I ever did was simple: I called it out. I didn't act like it wasn't happening. I pointed it out to everyone, and then I told them to do something about it.

Once people noticed it, they started going out of their way to sit with people who looked different from them. Naming it gave them permission to change it.

This doesn't require a long speech. A short, kind, honest observation is usually enough. Say what you see, and invite people to respond.

Lesson 2: Keep showing up

Sometimes people who have been hurt by past experiences will push you away. They may expect you to leave, because people have left them before.

In those moments, keep inviting. Keep showing up. Keep loving them. Trust is built through repetition. A single warm invitation may not be enough, but the tenth one might be. You want people to be surprised by how persistently you pursue them.

Lesson 3: Chase the lost sheep

Always be ready to go after someone who has gone missing. In Luke 15, a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to find the one that wandered off.

People from minority cultures in a majority-culture room are often used to slipping out the back door without anyone noticing or reaching out. If you don't pursue them, they may assume you didn't care that they left.

So when someone goes quiet or misses a week, reach out personally, and do it soon. A phone call or a text that says, "We missed you, and I wanted to check in," can tell someone they were seen.

Lesson 4: Make room for direct and indirect communicators

Some people say what they think plainly. Others communicate more gently or by hinting. Neither is wrong. Cultures and families teach us different ways of speaking, and a mixed group will have both.

The mistake is to treat one style as the right way to talk. A direct speaker may come across as harsh to someone who is used to a softer approach. An indirect speaker may seem evasive to someone who expects plain language. Neither person intends it.

As a leader, you can name both: "Some of us say things bluntly, and some of us say them gently. Let's give each other room." Then pay attention. If someone is indirect, ask a follow-up question in private. If someone is blunt, make sure others know it isn't meant as an attack.

Lesson 5: Go first outside your comfort zone

The leader sets the standard. If you want people to share honestly, you have to leave your own comfort zone first and show that the group is a safe place for everyone.

That can mean asking a question you're afraid to ask, admitting what you don't know, or sitting next to someone you wouldn't normally choose. People watch what you do more than they listen to what you say.

Lesson 6: Always get back to the Bible after hard conversations

One night in our group, we had an intense conversation about complementarian and egalitarian views on marriage and leadership. The discussion divided the room in many ways. Even some couples disagreed with each other. People finally got to say things they had been holding in for a long time, and they came at each other pretty hard.

I'm the kind of person who can sit in that kind of intensity without panicking. I felt that people needed to get it out, so I let them. When the night ended, some people were fired up.

The next week, I began by bringing everything back to the Bible. We started with the humility of Philippians 2 and the call to love our neighbor. I reminded the group that loving each other doesn't mean agreeing on every fine point of doctrine.

I knew this group was special by how well people responded. They loved each other. A week later, we had one of our sweetest group nights.

Two things stand out. First, a hard conversation doesn't have to end the group. Second, the way back is Scripture and humility, not winning the argument. If you aren't comfortable sitting in intensity, that's okay. Have a plan for how you'll step in, and don't let the conversation turn into personal attacks. Chapter 10 covers how to repair things when they go wrong.

Lesson 7: Interracial couples can help a group gel

In my experience, interracial couples help bring a group together, because they are already living out reconciliation in their marriage every day. They know what it takes to build a bridge.

A caution, though: don't turn them into your diversity project. Remember what we said in Chapter 2. Being the one representative of anything is heavy. Invite them because they're good members, not because of what they symbolize.

Lesson 8:
The table is where relationships form

Food is one of the most important places where relationships come together. I covered this in Chapter 4, so I'll only say here: if you want people from different cultures to become friends, feed them together.

When one person is asked to speak for everyone

One more thing. In a mixed group, it's common for one person to be asked, openly or quietly, to explain what everyone like them thinks. Please don't do that to people.

Instead of asking, "What do people from your culture think about this?" try asking, "What has your own experience been?" Let people speak for themselves, and let them pass if they'd rather not.

Different ways of worshiping and praying

Groups differ in how expressive or reserved they are. Some people pray loudly and freely. Some pray quietly and briefly. Some like singing together, and some would rather not. If you want a group where everyone belongs, don't make one style the standard.

Here is where the pineapple from Chapter 2 helps. Ask, "Is this sin, or is it just different?" Most of the time, it's fruit. Welcome it.

A mistake I've made

I don't always recognize that the Lord has made me very comfortable around different people and cultures. I can be myself and still work to relate to others. I also know how to talk about race, and I can use humor to disarm people. That doesn't come naturally to everyone.

If that's you, don't be discouraged, and don't try to copy my style. You'll just need to spend more time building relationships before you tackle the hard conversations. Start with one-on-one coffees, ask questions, and let trust build. Then, as the relationships grow, the harder conversations get easier.

Before you move on

1. Look at your room. Is there any self-sorting, by race, culture, or anything else? How could you name it kindly?
2. Who has gone quiet or slipped out recently? How will you reach out this week?
3. Which of the eight lessons feels hardest for you? Why?
4. Think of someone in your group from a different background. What would it look like to ask about their own experience instead of asking them to represent anyone?



In the next chapter we'll look at socioeconomic differences: the hidden costs of showing up, shift work and scheduling, and how to talk about money without assuming everyone shares your income.

CHAPTER 7

SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENCES



People tend to focus on racial and ethnic tension, and for good reason. But in the United States, I believe the tension around class runs just as deep.

People from different classes have different languages, values, ways of life, goals, and hopes. Many of those differences make other classes uncomfortable, or make someone feel they don't belong. And because nobody thinks of these as "culture," nobody talks about them. A person just feels, without being able to say why, that this isn't a place for them.

This is where Kingdom culture matters most. When Kingdom culture is allowed to flourish in a space, it sends a message that Jesus is the one who reigns, not any class. It becomes what Jesus called a city set on a hill (Matthew 5:14), a place people can see and walk toward.

A man who wanted to shout

I once discipled a young man whose life had been shaped by years of hardship. When he came to our church, he told me he wanted to yell during the sermons, because the gospel meant so much to him.

I asked him why he didn't. He couldn't explain, except that the culture of the church wouldn't allow it.

I watched this young man take major steps in his walk with Jesus. He began trying to step into leadership. And then, slowly, some people in the church began to feel threatened by him. People pointed out that he was loud and messy and that he made them uncomfortable.

He wasn't in sin. What I realized was that he wasn't polished enough to be seen as a leader by many of the middle- and upper-class people in our church.

Think about that. A man who had come to Jesus, and who was growing, was being measured by something other than Jesus. He was being measured by how closely he matched a style.

Scripture has something to say about this. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God tells Samuel that people look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. And James 2:1-4 warns the church against treating a person in fine clothes better than a person in shabby ones. Our habit of equating polish with maturity is an old one, and the Bible takes it on directly.

I want to be careful here. Paul does say that everything in the church should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). Order matters. But ask what "order" is for. In that same chapter, Paul says it's so that everyone is built up. If our standard of order is really a standard of comfort for one class, we have mixed up Kingdom culture with our own.

A young woman and a computer

We once tried to help a young woman get ready for a ministry trip. As we got into the preparation, it became clear that the process assumed a certain level of computer literacy, and she didn't have it.

Part of discipling her became teaching her to use a computer, helping her create her first budget, and walking her through things that many people assume parents teach their children.

Here's what I learned. To create space for all kinds of people to be discipled, you have to be willing to slow down. You have to teach people things that higher classes learn at a younger age. You have to move a bit slower with some people, and you can't get frustrated or assume they're dumb because they don't know.



The problem isn't intelligence. It's that no one ever taught them, and that is no flaw of theirs.

The hidden costs of showing up

The quickest way to find out who your group is built for is to look at what it costs to belong. Here are some costs that are easy to miss.

- **Childcare.** If someone has to pay a sitter to come, a free Bible study isn't free.
- **Transportation.** Gas, bus fare, or finding a ride. A group that meets across town can leave people out without anyone meaning to.
- **Hosting.** Space, food, and the pressure to keep up with how everyone else lives.
- **The workbook.** A required book that costs money turns a study into a purchase.
- **Food.** A potluck can be a joy or a burden. Chapter 4 talked about making sure nobody has to feel shame about what they bring.
- **Time.** Shift workers and people with variable schedules can't always commit to a fixed night. We talked about this in Chapter 3.
- **Clothes and appearance.** Does anyone feel they have to dress up or hide where they live?
- **Technology.** Does your group assume everyone has a smartphone, reliable data, and an email address?



You don't need to fix all of these. But walk through the list and ask, "Who could this leave out?" Then change one thing at a time. Provide the workbook. Set up a carpool. Call people instead of only texting.

Literacy and learning styles

In the college ministry, we had people who were highly educated and people who were barely literate, all in the same ministry. A small group needs to be ready for that.

A few simple practices help:

- **Don't go around the circle having everyone read aloud.** For someone who struggles to read, that's a moment of dread. Ask for volunteers, or read the passage yourself.
- **Offer ways to engage with Scripture other than reading.** Listening, talking it through, and hearing a passage twice are all legitimate.
- **Keep your language plain.** Remember the question "What is grace?" from Chapter 1. Explain terms without making anyone feel foolish for asking.
- **Avoid pop quizzes and homework that assume skills people may not have.**

Talking about money without assuming a median income

Some of the quickest ways to make someone feel they don't belong are small and unintended.

- An opening question like "What did you do for your vacation?" assumes everyone took one.
- Illustrations that mention second homes, retirement accounts, or private schools assume a certain life.
- Teaching on giving or budgeting in a way that treats "just save more" as the answer ignores people for whom there's no "more."
- Prayer request time can turn into a place where people with more resources have their needs seen, while people in constant crisis don't want to become the group's project.

Try different openers: "What was something good about your week?" Use illustrations from a wide range of lives, and when you teach on money, acknowledge that your hearers are in very different places. Ask people, privately, how you can make the group easier to be part of.

Don't be the rescuer who only gives

A warning about something I've seen often. Well-meaning groups can fall into a pattern where the people with more resources always give and the people with fewer always receive. That sets up a hierarchy, even if everyone is kind.

We talked about this in Chapter 5. Eat with people. Don't just serve them. And find ways to ask for gifts from people who don't have much money. Everyone has something to bring: their wisdom, their presence, their prayers, their skills, their food, and their story. A group where only one class gives is not a body. It's a charity.

Who gets to lead?

The story of the young man who wanted to shout leads to an important question: how does your group decide who looks like a leader?

If your unspoken standard is polish, articulate speech, a neat appearance, and a steady income, you'll keep passing over people God is raising up. Instead, go back to what Scripture asks of leaders. In 1 Timothy 3, the qualities listed are about character: self-control, a good reputation, hospitality, faithfulness. None of them is about class.



As you look for an apprentice or co-leader, ask: "Am I looking at character, or am I looking at comfort?"

The pineapple across classes

The pineapple from Chapter 2 applies here too.

Every class has skin that needs to come off. For some, it might be self-sufficiency, comfort, or the belief that they've earned what they have. For others, it might be hiding a need, distrusting everyone, or surviving by always having an angle. These are just possibilities, not rules about any group of people. And all of us have to bring them to Jesus.

Every class also has fruit. People who have lived with little often carry resourcefulness, generosity, and a deep familiarity with God's provision. People with more resources often carry skills in planning and stewardship and a capacity to open doors. Both are gifts.

The job of the leader is not to teach everyone to act like one class. It's to let Kingdom culture reshape all of us, and to keep the fruit of every class on the table.

Before you move on

1. Go through the list of hidden costs. Which ones apply to your group? What one thing could you change this month?
2. Who in your group might feel that they don't belong, and why? What have you actually asked them?
3. What unspoken standards do you use to decide who looks like a leader? Compare them with 1 Timothy 3.
4. Where might you need to slow down and teach something you assumed everyone knew?



There is a lot more to say about class than one chapter can hold. In the next chapter, we'll look at how to design questions and silence so that the loudest or fastest voices don't set the pace for everyone.

CHAPTER 8

QUESTIONS AND SILENCE ACROSS CULTURES

Who is quiet in your group depends on the topic.

That sounds simple, but most leaders don't notice it. We tend to sort people into "talkers" and "quiet ones" and treat that as a fixed fact about them. In a mixed group, it doesn't work that way. The same person who fills the room on one subject can go silent on the next.

If you talk about church hurt, some people have been waiting for that moment their whole lives. They finally have a place to say what happened. And others, who have always loved the church, may get very quiet. They may feel the conversation is aimed at something they treasure. Or it can be the opposite: someone who was hurt by the church goes quiet because everyone else in the room seems to love it.

Bring up politics, race, gender, oppression, justice, welfare, or any other sticky topic, and you'll see it again. Some people feel empowered to speak up. Others hide.

So let's talk about how to design questions and handle silence so that the group isn't run by whoever feels most comfortable on a given night.

Silence has many meanings

Back in Chapter 1, we looked at three rooms where the same silence meant three different things. Here's a longer list of what a quiet person might be thinking:

- I'm still forming my answer.
- I don't think anyone here will agree with me.
- I'm afraid of being labeled.
- I'm protecting someone, or something, I love.
- I don't have the words for this yet.
- This topic is too personal, or too painful.

- I don't know whether it's safe to say this.
- I was taught that people like me don't speak first.



None of these means the person is disengaged. And the person who talks easily isn't necessarily the most thoughtful or the most representative. They may just feel safest.

Your first job is to stop interpreting silence and start asking about it.

Track voice by topic

One habit that helps: after a session, jot down which topics came up and who spoke, and who didn't. Over a few weeks, patterns appear. You may find that one member only speaks on Scripture and goes quiet on anything personal. Another opens up on family and shuts down on politics.

That tells you where you might need to build more trust, and where a particular person might need a private conversation, an invitation, or a different kind of question.

Design questions that more people can answer

A lot of silence comes from the question itself. Some questions are easier for more kinds of people to enter. Here are some ways to widen the door.

- **Ask about experience before opinion.** "What do you think about X?" invites debate, and people who fear being wrong may hold back. "Tell me about a time when..." invites a story, and nobody can say your story is incorrect.

- **Start with the text.** A question like "What stood out to you in this passage?" gives everyone something to point to. It lets people join in without revealing much about themselves.

- **Offer several ways in.** Some people think out loud. Others need time. Give both a chance: ask the question, then say, "Take a minute to think, or jot something down, and we'll come back to it."

- **Use pairs.** Two people talking is less risky than twelve people listening. Ask people to turn to a neighbor for a couple of minutes, then bring it back to the group.

- **Let people pass.** Say plainly, "If you'd rather not answer, just say pass." Paradoxically, people speak more when they know they don't have to.

- **Avoid questions with a "right" answer.** If everyone can tell what the leader wants to hear, the people who disagree will go quiet and the people who agree will get louder.

What to do with silence

It's tempting to fill a silence the moment it appears. Resist that for a little longer than feels comfortable. Look down at your Bible instead of at faces, which takes the pressure off. Count slowly in your head. Often, someone is just working up to it.

But don't make silence a rule. In some rooms, a long pause is respectful thinking. In others, it's a standoff. Watch faces, posture, and breathing. If the pause is heavy, rephrase the question, make it more concrete, or move to pairs.



Index cards can help. Hand them out, ask people to write a sentence, and read a few aloud without names. Those who would never speak first often write the most honest things.

Sticky topics: a simple approach

In a mixed group, a sticky topic will come up. I'd rather you be ready than surprised. Here's the approach I'd suggest.

1. **Name it.** "This is a topic where we may disagree, and some of us may feel strongly." Saying so out loud lowers the temperature.

2. **Set a few ground rules.** Speak from your own experience instead of for a whole group. Listen to understand before you respond (James 1:19). No labels or name-calling.

3. **Invite the quiet side, gently.** Notice who hasn't spoken, and open the door: "I'd love to hear from someone who sees this differently." Remind them they can pass.

4. **Hold the intensity if you can.** In Chapter 6, I told the story of the night the group got heated and I let people get it out. Some conversations need that. But keep a line: no personal attacks. If it crosses the line, step in firmly and kindly.

5. **Return to Scripture.** After a hard conversation, bring people back to the Bible and to the humility of Philippians 2. We can love each other without agreeing on every point.

6. **Follow up privately.** Within a few days, reach out to those who went quiet or who got upset. This is the lost-sheep principle from Chapter 6. A short call can repair what a night of tension strained.

When church hurt comes up

This one deserves its own attention. When people begin to share about being hurt by the church, you'll often see two reactions at once.

For some, it's a release. They have carried it for years and never had a place to say it. Let them speak. Don't rush to defend the church, correct their story, or tie it up with a verse.

For others, especially those who have loved the church, it can feel like an attack. They may go silent or look uncomfortable. Don't read that as indifference. They're often grieving too, or they feel caught.

Your role is to hold both. You might say something like: "Both things can be true. The church has hurt people, and the church is something we love because Jesus loves it." Then thank both kinds of people for what they offered, and make sure each group gets a turn to speak without being dismissed.

The leader's own voice

Pay attention to how much your own opinions shape the conversation. When the leader speaks first on a sticky topic, everyone else hears where the "right" side is. People who disagree may quietly go along or go silent.

That doesn't mean you can never share a view. It means you should think about timing. Often it's better to ask first, listen to several people, and decide later whether to add your own thoughts. And when you do, say it in a way that makes space for others.

The pineapple and the hard topics

Many sticky topics come with a worldly culture attached. Each side can start to feel like the "Christian" side, with its own language, its own heroes, and its own villains. This is the pineapple problem again: we mistake our culture for Kingdom culture.

A helpful question to bring into the room is, "What does Jesus say about this, and where might our own culture be speaking louder than he is?" No party, movement, or class is the Kingdom. Ask that of every side, including your own.

Question stems to keep in your pocket

Here are some to use when a conversation needs a gentler or wider door:

- "What in this passage surprised you or bothered you?"
- "Can anyone share a time when this was hard for you to believe?"
- "Is there something we haven't heard yet?"
- "I'd like to hear from someone who sees this differently."
- "How might someone who grew up differently than you hear this?"
- "What would it look like to love someone who disagrees with you here?"

Before you move on

1. Think of the last three sessions. Which topics got the most voices? Which got the fewest? Who went quiet, and on what?
2. Pick one question from your next study and rewrite it to start with experience instead of opinion.
3. What sticky topic is likely to come up in your group? How would you name it and set ground rules?
4. When you're tempted to share your opinion first, what could you do instead?



In the next chapter, we'll look at prayer, vulnerability, and trust: what people feel safe disclosing, and how you can model openness without forcing it.

CHAPTER 9

PRAYER, VULNERABILITY, AND TRUST



You always need to keep an eye on your prayer culture.

Every group has one, whether the leader shapes it or not. It's the unspoken sense of what kinds of things are worth bringing to prayer, how deep you're supposed to go, and what it says about you when you do. And in a mixed group, it can push people in two opposite directions.

Two ways a prayer culture goes wrong

The first is the "not crazy enough" problem. Some people look around and see others sharing only the deepest, hardest, most dramatic things. Then they look at their own lives, which feel ordinary by comparison, and decide that what they're going through isn't worth sharing. So they say nothing. Meanwhile, they may be carrying something heavy.

The second is the "this group stays on the surface" problem. Other people watch members ask the group to pray for a grandmother's scratched pinky, while they themselves are going through a hard time in their marriage. They conclude that this is a group where real things don't get said. So they keep their real thing to themselves.

Both problems look different, but they end in the same place: someone who needed prayer didn't ask for it.

The cause is the same too. People calibrate to what they see. If the group's examples are all dramatic, ordinary struggles feel too small. If the group's examples are all light, serious struggles feel out of place.

Making room for every size of request

Your job as the leader is to widen the range of what feels welcome. Here are some ways.

- **Say it out loud.** "No request is too big or too small. A scratched pinky or a struggling marriage, we want to hear what's real for you."

- **Ask for "one thing, big or small."** That wording invites both the person who has a major need and the person who isn't sure theirs counts.

- **Don't reward drama.** If the group leans in only when something is shocking, people learn that ordinary needs don't matter. Show the same care for a small request as a large one.

- **Don't let small requests be the whole picture, either.** If you notice that every request has been light for weeks, you can gently ask, "Is there something underneath that we haven't gotten to?" Then give people a chance to answer, or not.

- **Follow up privately.** Often the real request arrives after the session, in a text or a quiet word at the door. Make that easy.



James 5:16 calls us to pray for one another and to be honest with one another. Galatians 6:2 tells us to carry each other's burdens. A group can't carry what nobody tells it about.

Discernment and flexibility

Prayer demands more discernment and flexibility from the leader than almost anything else in the group.

There will be nights when the most loving thing you can do is abandon your plan and spend the time praying. Maybe someone arrives devastated, or the room is heavy, or the conversation has gone somewhere that discussion can't reach. On those nights, the study will wait. A person who feels seen and prayed for will remember it far longer than they'll remember your three questions.

That can be hard for leaders who like their structure. In Chapter 3, we talked about designing the shape of the night. Keep that shape, but hold it loosely. Having a plan is what lets you set it aside when it needs to be set aside.



A good sign that it's time: when you notice that the question you planned is the last thing anyone is thinking about. Pause, name what you see, and ask, "Would it be okay if we just prayed for a while?"

A diverse group means diverse prayer lives

The more varied your group, the more varied the relationships with prayer will be.

Some people in your group have grown up in homes and churches where prayer was central. They pray often, long, and with intensity. Others have never heard anyone pray out loud except at a funeral. They may feel nervous, unsure what to say, or afraid of doing it wrong.

And in a diverse group, there's a better chance that you'll have someone who takes prayer very seriously, someone who has been frustrated by what they see as a lack of prayer in American churches. Their frustration may be real. They may know things about prayer that the rest of us need to learn.

Your job is to love them well, while also giving others in the group, who haven't been discipled as much in prayer, time to grow.

That's a balance. Here are some ways to hold it.

- **Honor the one with the deep prayer life.** Ask them to share what prayer has meant to them. Treat them as a resource, not a problem. Their fire may be a gift your group needs.
- **Don't make them the standard.** If everyone feels they have to match one person's intensity, the newer ones will pull back.
- **Teach prayer plainly.** The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1), so asking for teaching is part of following him. Offer simple models: a short prayer, a few lines of Scripture, or praying the Psalms aloud together.

- **Remove the pressure.** Let people pray silently, pray in a sentence, or just say "amen." Romans 8:26 reminds us that the Spirit helps us in our weakness when we don't know how to pray.

- **Vary the forms.** Pray in pairs or threes. Pray written prayers. Pray one sentence each around the circle. Different formats open the door for different people.

- **Let growth take time.** Someone who is uncomfortable praying aloud in month one may do it with joy in month six, but only if no one made them feel judged along the way.



If a member's intensity or frustration starts to strain the group, talk with them privately. Thank them for their hunger, ask what they're longing for, and invite them to help you grow the group's prayer life, instead of correcting everyone else.

What people feel safe disclosing

People bring different histories and rules about privacy into your group.

In some families and cultures, you don't discuss private matters outside the household. In some, you only share after a long time. In others, openness comes quickly. For people who have been hurt by church, as Chapter 8 noted, trust has already been broken once. For people with fewer resources, as Chapter 7 mentioned, sharing a need can feel like admitting weakness or inviting pity.

None of these is wrong. They simply mean you can't push for openness at the same speed for everyone.

Model it without forcing it

The leader sets the level. Here's how to model vulnerability without turning it into a demand.

- **Go first, at a real but measured depth.** Share something true and moderately weighty. Not so light that it signals shallow waters, and not so heavy that it overwhelms the room.
- **Make it an invitation.** "If you'd like to share something, we'd love to pray for you. If not, that's fine."
- **Guard what's shared.** Remind the group often that what's said in the room stays in the room. Trust grows only when people see that it's safe.
- **Don't turn prayer into advice time.** When someone shares a struggle, resist the urge to fix it. Pray first. Offer advice only if they ask.
- **Ask permission before praying about someone else.** A request about a person who isn't there should honor their privacy.
- **Let some things wait.** A person may need a month to say what's real. Be patient.

When it's bigger than prayer

Prayer is powerful, but it doesn't replace professional help. If someone shares that they're thinking of harming themselves, that they're being abused, or that they're in danger, pray with them and also help them reach the right people. Connect them with your pastor and with qualified help right away. You are not expected to be a counselor, and getting someone to help is part of caring for them. (Look back at Chapter 2 on knowing what your group can carry.)

Kingdom culture at the prayer table

Prayer may be where Kingdom culture is most visible. Every culture prays differently, and each one has fruit. Some pray with passion and volume, some with quiet reverence, some with ancient words, and some with plain speech. Some carry a habit of persistence that the rest of us could learn from.

Ask the pineapple question here too: "Is this sin, or is it just different?" Almost always, it's fruit, and your group can be richer for the variety.

At the center of it all is the same thing: a group of people with different backgrounds coming to the same Father, trusting that he hears.

Before you move on

1. Listen to the last few prayer times. What range of requests did you hear? Do you see the "not crazy enough" or the "surface-level" pattern?
2. What could you say next week to widen what feels welcome?
3. Who in your group has the deepest prayer life, and who is newest to prayer? How could each help the other?
4. Do you know where to send someone who needs more help than your group can give?



In the next chapter, we'll look at what to do when something goes wrong: offense, a joke that lands badly, and how to repair a relationship when you've hurt someone, or someone has hurt you.

CHAPTER 10

WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Something is going to go wrong in your group. I can promise you that.

Someone will be offended. Someone will leave. Someone will decide you don't love people well, or that you're on the wrong side of something, and they will say so out loud. And sometimes you'll be blamed for something you honestly don't feel you did.

So what do you do then? It starts with the hardest stories I have, because I'd rather you learn from my worst moments than repeat them.

The member who left

In my second group, which had a lot going on, there was a member who was going through a hard season.

One night the conversation turned to evangelism. The member did not believe we should be sharing the gospel with others, and felt that doing so meant forcing our beliefs on people. I disagreed, and I think that moment started this person down a troubled path with me.

Later that night, another member said something that upset them again. They decided not to come back to group, and then not to come to church at all. They told me it was because I hadn't pushed back enough on what was said.

They were very critical of my leadership and my ability to love people, and they were vocal about it. That was hard to hear.

So I did something many leaders do. I checked in with a few other people in the group to see whether I had done something wrong in their eyes. Nobody agreed with the criticism.

But here is what I came to see. The reality was that this person was still hurting, and I was genuinely concerned about their soul. The criticism of me was real, but it wasn't the whole story, and it wasn't really about me.

What I took from that

A few things.

Hurt often shows up as criticism of the leader. When someone attacks your leadership, ask what they might be carrying. It doesn't mean they're wrong about everything, and it doesn't mean they're right. It means there's likely more going on.

Seeking counsel is wise, but it isn't a verdict. Asking trusted people, "Did I handle that badly?" is a good instinct. Just be careful with what you do with the answer. If nobody agrees with the critic, that doesn't mean there's nothing to own. And you shouldn't turn the group into a jury. A better question to bring to your pastor or co-leader is, "How do I love this person well?"

There's always something you can own. Even when you don't think you did anything wrong, there is almost always some part you can take responsibility for: your tone, your timing, a moment you didn't listen, or a time you could have followed up sooner.

You can't control the outcome. Keep the door open, keep praying, and trust the Lord with their soul. Years later, we reconnected and reconciled. Looking back, this person had a lot of other things going on, and the enemy used that pain to try to pull them away from the Lord.

The podcast

Here's a smaller story with a big lesson. One time I shared a link to a podcast I thought had an insightful conversation. A member of the group disliked it, because the hosts "seemed like" they belonged to one political side, and because I had sent it, I must belong to that side too. That person told me they couldn't come to group any longer.

That moment fractured our relationship, and I don't know that it ever recovered. I was able to get them to come back to group, but they didn't trust me anymore.

I'm telling you this because it didn't take a heated debate or a major disagreement. It took one link. People in your group read your actions through their own history, and you often can't predict how.

What I'd do differently:

- **Respond quickly and curiously.** Reach out within a day or two. Ask what they heard, not what you meant. "I'd like to understand how that landed for you."
- **Don't defend your intentions first.** Your intentions matter, but the impact matters to them. Acknowledge the impact before you explain.
- **Be careful what you share.** A link is a small thing, but members may take it as a signal of where the leader stands. Think about whether it's helping the group, and consider saying, "I'm sharing this because it's interesting, not because I'm endorsing everything about it."
- **Stick to the Word.** Let the Word of God do the heavy lifting.
- **Accept that some ruptures take a long time to heal.** And a few don't. Keep showing up, as we said in Chapter 6, and keep treating the person with warmth.

When someone is offended

Offense in a mixed group comes in many forms. A joke lands badly. A remark touches on someone's background. Someone makes an assumption about a person's income, culture, or family. Often these are small and unintended. Sometimes the term people use for them is "microaggressions," meaning small comments that leave someone feeling dismissed or unseen, even when no harm was meant.

Whether you did it or someone else did, a few principles help.

If you're the one who said it:

1. Stop and acknowledge it right then if you notice. "I just realized that came out wrong. I'm sorry."
2. Follow up privately within a few days. "I've been thinking about what I said. I'm sorry. I'd like to hear how it landed."

3. Apologize without adding "but." "I'm sorry if you were offended" is weaker than "I'm sorry I said that."
4. Explain what you would do differently next time.
5. Ask what repair would look like, and then listen.

If someone else said it in the group:

1. Don't let it pass in silence. A quiet person who hears an offense go unaddressed learns that the group isn't safe.
2. Redirect gently in the moment if you can: "Let me pause us there. I want to make sure we're all hearing this the way it's meant."
3. Check in privately with the person who was hurt, and with the one who said it. Both need care.

The pull to be the one with the answers

In my groups, I've seen people go through hard things and tell me privately, and then show up to group acting as if they have it together. Often, they become the one giving advice and counsel, as a way of hiding their own struggles.

If you see this, don't expose it. Pull them aside and say, "I really value how you help others. I also know you've been carrying a lot. Who's helping you?" Give them a chance to receive, not just give. As we said in Chapter 9, a group that only gives out advice has not yet become a place to be honest.

When someone brings beliefs the Bible doesn't support

In a group with a wide mix of backgrounds, you may have someone who is spreading beliefs that don't line up with Scripture. Don't ignore it, and don't pounce. When Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos teaching incompletely, they took him aside privately and explained things more carefully (Acts 18:26).

In practice: go back to the passage with the whole group, talk privately with the person, and involve your pastor if it continues. You are responsible for protecting the group's health.

Some leaders believe you should correct anything incorrect the moment you hear it. But if you do that too often, people who are afraid of saying something wrong will never speak up. Then you may think your group has sound doctrine when people are really just hiding what they think.

When someone comes for the money

We've had people come to group mainly to ask the group for money. This is a hard one, because real need exists, and Chapter 7 reminded us to be careful with that. But some people use the group in ways that harm it.

It's wise to decide ahead of time how financial requests are handled. Many groups settle on: "The group prays for needs, and financial help goes through the church's process." Talk with your pastor about what your church has available. That protects people with real needs from being handled unevenly, and it protects the group from being treated as a source of funds.

Some churches want groups to meet needs first, before anything goes to the church level. If that's the case, the leader will need to set some boundaries. In one group, I learned that someone was collecting phone numbers at group, then calling and texting people over and over to ask for money, and getting really upset when they said no. I had to have a hard conversation with him and tell him he couldn't do that anymore.

Two things every leader needs

What I've learned from all of these experiences is that you shouldn't lead in the church unless you have two things at once.

The first is the humility to be nothing so that God can be everything. John the Baptist said it best: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). When your goal is that God is glorified, not that you look good, it becomes much easier to listen to criticism, own your part, and keep loving someone who has pushed you away.

The second is a fear of God that is greater than your fear of man. Proverbs 29:25 says the fear of man lays a snare. If you lead out of fear of what people think, you'll spend your energy pleasing them and winning them to yourself. Paul says in Galatians 1:10 that if he were still trying to please people, he wouldn't be a servant of Christ. When you fear God more than people, you can do what's right, even when it's costly.

You need both. A leader with humility but no fear of God becomes a people-pleaser. A leader with a fear of God but no humility becomes hard and defensive. Together, they let you hear a harsh word, own what's yours, and still stand where you need to stand.



And for the sake of unity, you will sometimes be blamed when you don't think you did anything wrong. That's part of leading. Take ownership of what you can, and entrust the rest to God.

A simple path for repair

When something breaks, here is a path you can follow:

1. **Pause and pray.** Don't respond in the heat of the moment.
2. **Go privately first (Matthew 18:15).** Don't fix it in front of the group, unless it happened in front of the group.
3. **Listen before you explain.** Let them finish. Ask what it was like.
4. **Own your part.** Name it specifically.
5. **Don't demand agreement or forgiveness.** An apology that requires a response isn't a gift.
6. **Bring in a pastor or co-leader** when it's heavy, or when it keeps happening.
7. **Give it time,** and keep the door open.
8. **Release the outcome to God.**

The pineapple, one more time

Many offenses in a mixed group happen where cultures meet and nobody realizes it. The leader's skin can show up here: defensiveness, the need to be liked, or the need to be right. A person's skin can show up too. But there's fruit in the repair itself. A group that has watched a leader apologize, listen, and keep loving will trust that leader more, not less.

Before you move on

1. Think of a time something broke in a group you've been part of. What could you have owned?
2. Is there someone in your group now with whom trust is strained? What's one step you could take this week?
3. Which of the two, humility or the fear of God, is harder for you right now? Why?
4. Have you decided how your group will handle financial requests? If not, who can you talk to?



In the next chapter, we'll turn the mirror on the leader: your own default assumptions, your blind spots, and how to stay teachable.

CHAPTER 11

LEADER SELF-AWARENESS

The problem with a blind spot is that you are blind to it.

You don't realize how you sound. You don't see how you lead, or how you come across to the people in your group. And because you can't see it, you can't fix it, even while it hurts your leadership.

So how do you find what you can't see? And how do you stay teachable for as long as you lead? That's where we're going in this chapter.

Why you need other godly people in your group

One of the best reasons to have other godly people in your group is that they can see what you can't.

That's one of the quiet gifts of a mixed group. People from different backgrounds notice different things about you. Someone from another culture may hear a phrase you use as dismissive. Someone with less money may notice an assumption you didn't know you were making. Someone younger or older may see how you handle authority.

Proverbs 12:15 says a wise person listens to advice. Proverbs 27:6 says the wounds of a friend can be trusted. Psalm 139:23-24 is a good prayer for any leader: search me, God, and know my heart. But you also need people, not just prayer, to show you what you can't see.

Why people don't tell you

You're the leader, and that changes how people talk to you. Many members won't tell you what they really think, even when you ask. They don't want to hurt you, or they worry about the relationship, or they assume you wouldn't want to hear it. This is more likely for people who come from cultures where it's disrespectful to correct someone in authority, or for people who have been burned before.

So don't wait for feedback to come. Go looking for it.

Build a habit of asking for feedback

One of the best things you can do is constantly ask people for feedback and show that you can take it.

Here are some ways to ask.

- **Ask specific questions.** "How am I doing?" invites "fine." Try, "What's one thing I do that makes it harder for you to share?" or "When have you felt left out in group?"
- **Ask the quieter ones privately.** The people who say the least often see the most.
- **Ask your co-leader.** Chapter 3 talked about building a leadership team. A good co-leader will tell you what others won't.
- **Ask at the end of a season.** Build it into your rhythm. Chapter 12 has a short review you can use.
- **Ask someone outside the group.** A mentor or pastor who knows you, and who isn't invested in the group's comfort, can see patterns you can't.



When someone gives you feedback, say thank you first. Don't explain, defend, or correct. Think about it later, and when you act on it, tell them. People learn quickly whether telling you the truth is worth it.

Be someone people can tease

I have always led in a way that gives people room to make fun of me. I have thick skin, and I've learned a great deal about how people see me from the jabs they take at me. The way someone teases you often shows something they've noticed but wouldn't say seriously.

If you can do this, here's the rule I live by: you have to be able to take a jab, and not throw any back. Teasing flows one way. If a leader jabs back, the room learns that teasing the leader costs something, and it stops.

I want to add two cautions, though.

1. **Humor can hide a real hurt.** A joke may be a test, a way of bringing something up carefully. When someone teases you about something repeatedly, ask them privately what's behind it.

2. **Not everyone can joke with the leader.** I said in Chapter 6 that using humor to talk about hard things comes naturally to me but not to everyone. Some people don't feel they have the standing, the safety, or the cultural permission to tease the person in charge. Don't assume that no jabs means no feedback. If you only hear from the people who feel free to joke, you're hearing from a narrow slice of your group.

Your defaults are showing

Every leader has defaults, which are the things they assume are normal. They're hard to spot because they feel like common sense. Here are some questions to help you see yours.

- Whose stories do I tell? Whose examples do I use?
- Whose names do I remember easily? Whose do I mix up?
- What do I assume about people's time, money, education, or family structure?
- What do I assume about how people pray, dress, speak, or celebrate?
- When I picture a "good" group member, who do they look like?
- Who do I naturally turn to when I need a good answer? Who do I overlook?
- What kind of humor, music, and food do I treat as the default?



You don't have to answer all of these. Pick the one that makes you most uncomfortable. That's probably the one that matters.

The pull toward sameness

I've realized something about myself that explains a lot.

When I lead mixed groups, I often forget how differently I'm wired. I don't want to be around sameness all the time. I find it boring. Most people don't feel that way. Most people would rather be around people who think the same way they do, vote the same way, have similar perspectives, and look like them.

That's not a character flaw. It's human. Sameness is comfortable. It takes less energy. You don't have to explain yourself, translate, or wonder if you'll be misunderstood.

But it means you can't assume your members share your appetite for difference. If you love variety, remember that for many people, a mixed group is a stretch. They may be glad to be there and tired at the same time. They may need more time, more explanation, and more encouragement than you do.

If you're the opposite, if you feel more at home with people like you, that's normal too. Just be honest about it. Ask yourself where sameness shows up in your own life: your friends, your news, your church circles, the people you invite to dinner. Then choose, a little at a time, to step beyond it.



Revelation 7:9 describes a crowd from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Nobody gets there by accident. The people who will stand in that crowd are being prepared for it now, in rooms like yours.

Comfort is not the same as competence

In Chapter 6, I told you I sometimes forget that being comfortable around different people came easily to me, and that it doesn't for everyone. The lesson cuts both ways.

If difference feels natural to you, don't assume it's natural for your members, and don't assume you've mastered it. Comfort isn't competence. You can be at ease and still miss things.

If difference doesn't feel natural to you, don't be discouraged. Skill grows through relationships. Spend time in homes and churches that aren't like yours. Ask questions. Make mistakes and learn from them. And bring on a co-leader whose background and strengths differ from yours.

Practices that keep you teachable

- **Find a mentor outside your group.** Someone who has led longer, or who comes from a different background than you.
- **Listen to voices you don't usually hear.** Read books, follow teachers, and have conversations with people from other cultures and classes.
- **Eat in someone else's home.** It's one of the best ways to learn what's normal for other people.
- **Apologize quickly.** The faster you say "I was wrong," the more teachable you look.
- **Review each season.** Ask what worked, what didn't, and who you didn't hear from.
- **Rest.** A tired leader is a defensive leader. Chapter 3 talked about sharing the load. Take it seriously.

The crown and the skin

The pineapple comes back here, and this time it points at you.

Every leader has a crown that needs to come off: the desire to be liked, to be right, to be admired, or to be in charge. Only Jesus is King. In Chapter 10, we talked about the humility to be nothing so that God can be everything, and a fear of God greater than a fear of man. That's where self-awareness starts. A leader who needs to be seen as good can't hear that they've been unkind.

Every leader also has skin: habits and assumptions that are rough and need to go. Most of them you can't see on your own, which is why you need people.



And every leader has fruit: strengths, experiences, and ways of seeing that are gifts from God. Don't throw those out in the name of humility. Offer them, and let others help shape them.

Before you move on

1. Who in your group, or in your life, could tell you something hard about how you lead? Have you asked them?
2. Can people tease you? Do you take a jab without throwing one back? Who might not feel safe teasing you?
3. Pick one of the "defaults" questions above and answer it honestly.
4. Where does sameness show up in your own life? What's one step beyond it you could take this month?



In the final chapter, we'll gather the tools: scripts, a group covenant, a food and hosting checklist, and a season review you can use again and again.

CHAPTER 12

TEMPLATES AND SCRIPTS



These are tools, not rules. Change the words until they sound like you. A script that sounds like a script will cost you the trust it was meant to build.

You'll find eight tools here, plus a few extras:

1. Invitation scripts
2. A group covenant for a mixed room
3. A first-night plan
4. A food and hosting checklist
5. A hidden-cost audit
6. A card for sticky topics
7. Repair conversations
8. A season-end review

Tool 1: Invitation scripts

The pattern is the same each time: name a specific reason you thought of them, say what you're asking, and make it easy to say no.

For someone you know well:

> *"I'm gathering a small group on Tuesday nights, and I've been thinking about who I'd want in the room. You came to mind right away, because [specific reason: the way you ask questions, how you treat people, the stories you tell]. It would start as a short season, with a meal each week. Would you consider coming to the first night and seeing how it feels?"*

For someone who is hesitant or has been hurt by church:

> *"I'm starting a group, and I'd love for you to be part of it. I should say that it's not the kind of group where anyone has to perform or pretend. We eat, we talk, we open the Bible, and we pray. You'd be welcome to just listen. If the first night isn't for you, I'll understand, and we'll still be friends."*

For someone who doesn't go to church:

> *"We have a group of friends that gets together once a week for dinner and conversation about life and the Bible. You don't need any background. We have people who have never opened one. I think you'd bring something we'd be missing. Want to come to dinner and see?"*

For a couple:

> *"We're starting a table of friends on Tuesdays and we'd love to have the two of you at it. We think you'd enjoy it, and honestly, we think the group would be better with you. Can we send you the details?"*



Ask in person or by phone when you can. Ask one person or couple at a time. And remember Chapter 2: you're looking for a mix, not one kind of person.

Tool 2: A covenant for a mixed room

Read this aloud on the first night. Ask whether anyone wants to change or add something. Then let the group own it.

Our commitments to one another

1. We came to follow Jesus together. We let him, not any one culture, set the standard for how we live and treat each other.
2. We show up, and when we can't, we tell someone.
3. What's said here stays here.
4. We get curious before we judge. We ask before we assume.
5. We make room. Everyone gets a turn to speak, and anyone can pass.
6. We eat together, and everyone belongs at the table, whether they bring something or not.
7. When we hurt each other, we go to each other first.
8. We start and end on time, so that everyone can plan their lives around it.

Tool 3: A first-night plan

This plan assumes the rhythm we talked about in Chapter 3, with a meal and then the meeting. Adjust the times to fit your group.

Time	What happens
First 30 minutes	Meal. Say hello at the door, and make sure no one eats alone.
Next 10 minutes	Welcome. Share the covenant and ask for any changes.
Next 20 minutes	Stories around the circle: "Where did you grow up, and what's a meal from home you still remember?" Everyone answers, and anyone can pass.
Next 40 minutes	Read a short passage together. Ask one question that starts with the text, and let people think before they answer. Your church may want you to do sermon questions. Follow the lead of your local church.
Next 15 minutes	Prayer. Ask for "one thing, big or small." Pray briefly.
Last 5 minutes	Logistics. Confirm next week's night, who is bringing what, and how people prefer to be contacted.



Two reminders: don't rush the meal, and don't try to cover too much. The goal of night one is that everyone feels they were seen and wants to come back.

Tool 4: A food and hosting checklist

Before the first meal:

- [ ] Ask about allergies, health needs, and any religious or personal restrictions.
- [ ] Choose two or three dependable families to anchor the main dish, and ask them privately.
- [ ] Decide who picks the theme each week.
- [ ] Decide who handles setup and who handles cleanup. Rotate them.

Every week:

- [ ] Label dishes with the main ingredients.
- [ ] Make sure there's something on the table everyone can eat.
- [ ] Remind people that bringing nothing is fine.
- [ ] Invite people to share the story behind a dish if they want to.
- [ ] Send leftovers home with people who want them.

Every season:

- [ ] Ask whether the food is costing anyone more than they can comfortably give.
- [ ] Make sure the same households aren't always hosting, cooking, or cleaning up.
- [ ] Ask whether any theme has felt like an assignment instead of an invitation.

Tool 5: A hidden-cost audit

Answer each question honestly. For every "yes," write down one change you could make.

Question	Yes / No	One change
Does anyone need to pay for childcare to attend?		
Does anyone struggle to get a ride or pay for gas?		
Does anyone have to buy a book or a device to take part?		
Does the meeting time exclude shift workers?		
Does anyone feel pressure to host, cook, or dress a certain way?		
Do we assume everyone has a smartphone, data, or email?		
Do we ask people to read aloud without checking how they feel about it?		
Do we use examples that assume vacations, homes, or investments?		



Don't try to fix everything at once. Choose one this month.

Tool 6: A card for sticky topics

Print this, keep it in your Bible, or read it aloud when a hard conversation begins.

When we disagree

1. Speak from your own experience. Don't speak for a whole group.
2. Listen to understand before you answer.
3. No labels and no name-calling.
4. It's okay to pass.
5. We can love each other without agreeing on everything.
6. After this, we come back to the Bible and to Jesus.



After a heated night, open the next session with this: "Last week was hard. Before we start, I want us to remember why we're here. Let's go back to Philippians 2 together."

Tool 7: Repair conversations

When you've hurt someone:

> *"I've been thinking about what I said, and I'm sorry. I'd like to hear how it landed for you. I'm not looking to explain myself. I just want to understand."*

Then listen. When they finish, say what you heard, name your part, and ask, "What would help from here?"

When someone has hurt you:

> *"Something said in group has been on my mind, and I'd rather talk with you about it than let it sit. Could we grab coffee this week? I'd love to hear your side, and share mine."*

When someone has left the group:

> *"I've missed you, and I wanted to reach out. There's no agenda. I'd just like to hear how you're doing. If something about the group made it hard, I'd want to know."*



Don't write a speech. Keep it short, warm, and honest.

Tool 8: A season-end review

Do this at the end of every season, before you decide what comes next.

Questions for members (on index cards, no names required):

1. What has been the best part of this group for you?
2. What has been hard?
3. Was there a time you felt left out, or wanted to say something and didn't?
4. What would make it easier for someone new to feel at home?
5. Is there something you'd like us to do differently?

Questions for you and your co-leader:

1. Who spoke the most? Who spoke the least? What did we do about it?
2. Who has stopped coming, or has gone quiet? Have we reached out?
3. What did we assume about people that turned out to be wrong?
4. What cost us the most energy, and where did we need help?
5. What did we see God doing?



Take the answers to your pastor or a mentor. Choose two things to change next season, and say them out loud to the group.

A few extras

Prayer openers:

1. "What's one thing, big or small, you'd like us to pray about this week?"
2. "Who is someone you're thinking about right now?"
3. "What's something you're thankful for, and what's something you're worried about?"

Questions that widen the door:

1. "What stood out to you in this passage?"
2. "Is there a time when this was hard for you to believe?"
3. "How might someone who grew up differently hear this?"
4. "What would it look like to love someone who sees this differently?"

When you need to say something hard to the whole group:

> *"I want to name something I'm noticing, and I'm including myself in it. [Name it kindly.] I'd like us to try something different, together."*

A closing word

The groups I remember best weren't the ones that ran the smoothest. They were the ones where people who had no business sitting at the same table ended up at the same table, and stayed.

I think that's what the Kingdom looks like. Not a place where everyone is the same, but a place where every culture gives up its crown and its skin, keeps its good fruit, and gathers around one King. Revelation 7:9 tells us we're headed toward a crowd from every nation, tribe, people, and language. Your small group is a place to start practicing.

You don't have to be perfect, and you won't be. You will say the wrong thing, miss someone who needed you, and get blamed for things you didn't do. Keep showing up. Keep asking. Keep eating together.

And keep your eyes on the One who is building the whole thing.

URBAN THEOLOGIANS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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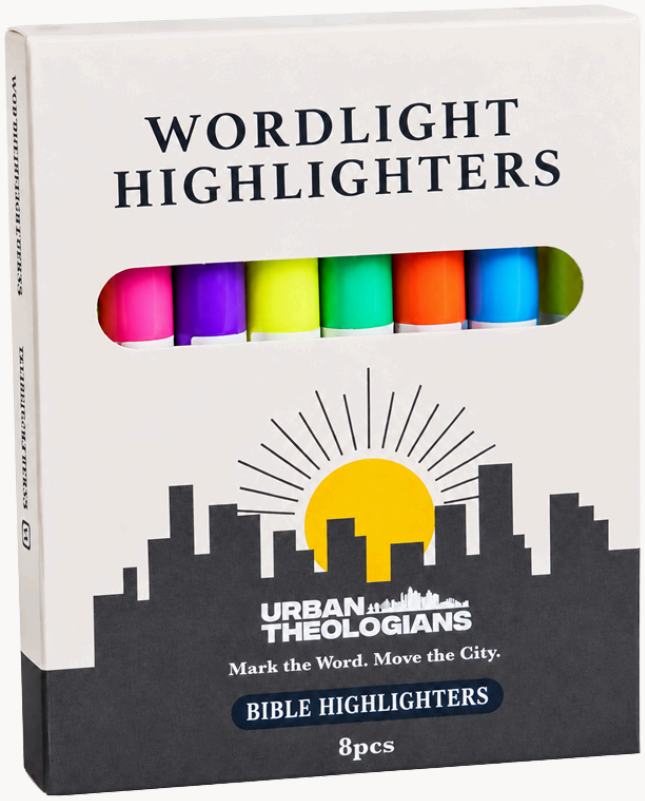
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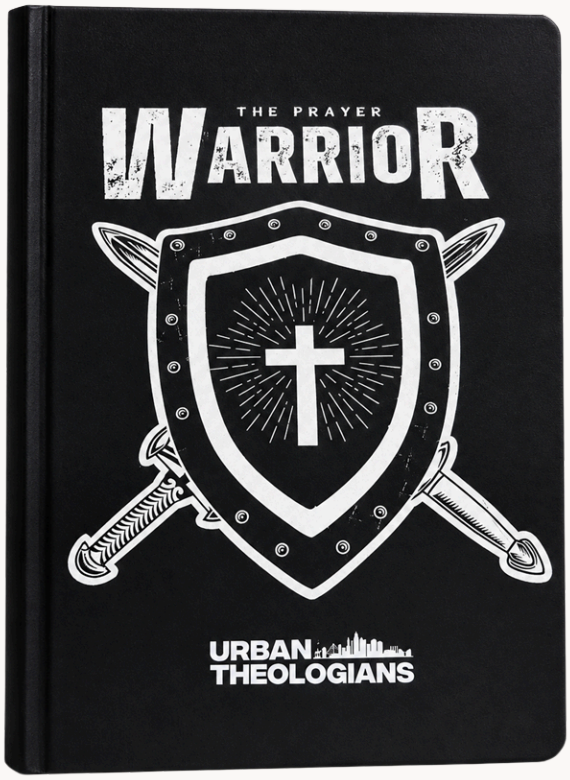
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