

# Orientation Guide: Small-Group Host



<b>Contents</b> .....	PAGE
<b>Leader's Guide</b> .....	2
<b>Overview</b>	
THE RIGHT HOST FOR A GREAT SMALL GROUP	
<i>by Tom Bandy</i> .....	3-4
<b>Prepare for Your Role</b>	
JOB DESCRIPTION: SMALL-GROUP HOST	
<i>by Pat J. Sikora</i> .....	5-6
STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE: SMALL-GROUP HOST	
<i>by Pat J. Sikora</i> .....	7-8
ADVICE FROM AN EXPERIENCED HOST	
<i>by Vaughn and Jaime Stoll</i> .....	9-10
<b>Perform Your Role</b>	
HOSTING WITH EXCELLENCE	
<i>by Jon Ferguson</i> .....	11
CREATING A GREAT SMALL-GROUP ATMOSPHERE	
<i>by Mike Mack</i> .....	12-13
COMMON OBSTACLES OF A SMALL-GROUP HOST	
<i>by Rick Howerton</i> .....	14-16
SHARING A MEAL	
<i>by Heather Zempel</i> .....	17
THE CHILDCARE CONUNDRUM	
<i>by Reid Smith</i> .....	18-19
<b>Resources</b>	
FURTHER EXPLORATION .....	20

## Leader's Guide



*How to use "Small-Group Host Orientation Guide" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings*

*Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop small-group hosts who can think strategically and biblically about community. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.*

"Orientation Guides" are easy-to-use tools that help prepare people to take on new roles within the church. Each guide focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts first present an overview of the specific ministry and role, including an interview with a successful practitioner (p. 9–10). The second section provides focused, practical information to help you perform your duties.

This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training for small-group hosts—to help them understand their vital role in facilitating an atmosphere and attitude that is conducive to community and spiritual growth. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to give new and potential hosts an idea of what would be expected of them, see the "Job Description" (p. 5–6) and "Standards of Performance" (p. 7–8) written by Pat J. Sikora. To gain information on creating an ideal physical atmosphere for a small-group meeting, see Mick Mack's "Creating a Great Small-Group Atmosphere" (p. 12–13). And "The Childcare Conundrum," by Reid Smith (p. 18–19), provides a great look at all the different options for providing for children in a group.

We hope you benefit from this guide as you equip your church's small-group hosts to bless their small groups through practical and effective service.

Need more material, or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at [www.SmallGroups.com](http://www.SmallGroups.com).

To contact the editors:

E-mail [SmallGroups@christianitytoday.com](mailto:SmallGroups@christianitytoday.com)

Mail SMALLGROUPS.COM, Christianity Today International  
465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL 60188



## The Right Host for a Great Small Group



*Practical tips for identifying and engaging the small-group hosts in your church.*

Romans 12:13

We all know that the most important element in small-group life is leadership. Larger churches with more complex small-group systems often separate the role of small-group *host* and small-group *leader*. Smaller churches with less complex systems often combine the role of *host* and *leader*. Primarily, I want to talk about the *hosting* role, but I will add some advice for those churches that are combining two roles in one person.

### What Makes a Great Host?

The qualifications of a great host are both social and spiritual. You are looking for someone with strong gifts in hospitality, empathy for newcomers or strangers, and trustworthiness to keep confidences.

Obviously, a great host is one who can make people comfortable and feed them great food. Many people can throw a party for their friends, but a small-group host is more extraordinary. They can make people from different backgrounds, cultures, careers, and ages feel right at home. They have the capacity to forget themselves and step squarely in the shoes of their visitors. They sense their guests' anxieties, embarrassments, and second thoughts; and they are quick to communicate assurance, acceptance, and encouragement. They overcome self-consciousness quickly by making introductions and reinforcing the spiritual growth purpose for the gathering.

That's an important point: there is a spiritual aspect to a great host. It's not that they are particularly pious, and certainly they are not evaluative or judgmental of their guests. However, their words and behaviors reveal that they live up to the core values of the church, and hold their bedrock beliefs dear. There is no joke at the expense of others; no favoritism or condescension due to age, ability, or wealth. The great host is consistently Christian on and off the job. Greeting friends or greeting strangers, they are the same.

### Where Do We Find Great Hosts?

So, where do you find these deliberate Christians with their unpretentious manners and spontaneous generosity? Spiritual gifts discernment inventories will provide clues, but remember that you are looking for *relational* gifts more than helping excellence. You don't necessarily need excellent decorators, cooks, servers, and workers as small-group hosts. You need people who enjoy people, enjoy being with people, and enjoy encouraging the best out of people.

Consider the Bible sisters Mary and Martha. I think many churches mistakenly think Martha will be the better hostess because she will always be in the kitchen and wait *on the needs* of the guests. In fact, I think Mary is always the better small-group hostess because she will always be in the living room and *encourage the conversations* of the guests. Mary is the *relational* one. Martha is the *practical* one. The relational one may make poorer coffee, but will establish the best environment for sharing.

Where does one find Mary? She will not necessarily be in the kitchen. She will be wherever Jesus is. Wherever you find two or three already gathered, and Jesus is in their midst, that's where Mary will show up. So look among your regular worship attenders, rather than among your worship irregulars. Look within existing large and small groups, and observe who seems to be the critical link between people. If they are there, the group gathers conversational momentum, and newcomers are attracted to the event. If they are missing, the group falls silent, and members drift away. These are "nexus" people. They may not have effervescent personalities,

but they have magnetic abilities. It is safe to be in their presence. People forget themselves, pay attention to others, and through others glimpse Christ.

If you are looking beyond the church membership, look for people with a reputation for an open door and an open heart. Test them. Show up at an odd hour and see if they invite you inside happily or grudgingly. Are you an intrusion or a pleasant surprise? Ask around. Where do the neighborhood children want to go on Halloween night? Who has already organized the Christmas caroling outing? Who is eager to plan a leadership retreat?

### How Can We Persuade Them to Serve?

I know this is a question many church leaders ask, but I find it an odd question. If you have to *persuade* them, they are probably not called to be a host. Martha might need to be persuaded to leave the household chores, but Mary needs no persuasion to drop everything and run to be with Jesus. The best hosts spontaneously “see Jesus” in the face of a stranger, an innocent, a person in need, or a visitor. Being a host is their natural state of being, and being a host of a small group is a logical extension of what they really enjoy doing anyway. Therefore, you need to clarify the opportunity to be with Christ and remind them of the mission. They usually respond with joy.

What is more likely—given the state of distrust and hidden judgment that pervades so many institutional churches—is that you will need to convince potential hosts that they will *not* be expected to do other things. They will *not* be expected to attend lots of training meetings or write reports (although most will welcome some basic training, especially in demographically diverse communities). They will *not* be expected to recruit people into membership or to do other tasks. They will *not* be expected to do further visitations, speak in public, or write reports. They will *not* be evaluated on their pie-making, housecleaning, technological expertise, or articulate evangelism. There are no sidetracks or hidden agendas. They are simply being offered another opportunity to do what they love to do.

Most hosts enjoy serving as a team—perhaps as a couple. This, too, is natural. They like people and enjoy working with people. It is reassuring to work in tandem with another person who shares your passion. I suspect Priscilla and Aquila led their small groups together, even as they mentored Apollos together. I also suspect that, like most hosts, they were more willing to host a small group if they also participated in their own small group where they did not have to host. Priscilla and Aquila were better small-group hosts because they were already part of Paul’s small group. Even hosts need to be hosted.

### And What if the Host Is the Leader, Too?

In smaller churches, the group host may also be the group leader. Remember that the real key to leadership is *attitude*, not skills. Of course it is wise to train small-group leaders in basic skills for communication, facilitation, listening, and teaching. It is good to equip group leaders with scriptural knowledge and coach leaders to exercise spiritual habits. You can train them to interpret different personalities, overcome competition, and resolve conflict. But the really important thing is for the small-group leader to have the right *attitude*.

The leadership *attitude* is what can evolve a small group host into a small group leader as well. It is the attitude of mission . . . the passion to grow personally, relationally, and spiritually . . . and the commitment to go deeper in Christ and further with Christ in God’s mission to redeem the world. It is possible to have the *attitude*, but be unable to acquire the skills, and a host may not be a good leader. But I think it is quite impossible for a small group leader to be successful, no matter what their expertise, if they don’t have the *attitude*.

Churches with long experience in small group multiplication understand that this is a system through which Christians *mature* as disciples. The balance between the role of “host” and the role of “leader” changes as Christians mature. In the beginning, the hosting role is extraordinarily important. Seekers and newcomers need to be part of an environment of Christian virtue, trust and acceptance . . . and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Later, as Christians mature, they will overcome any flawed environment, and will ignore their own comfort, so that they can deepen their experience of God and sharpen their perception of God’s mission. The leader becomes more important than the host. As Paul said, some leaders prepare the ground, and some water the shoots, and still others harvest the mission, but all together participate in the singleminded service of Jesus Christ.

— TOM BANDY; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International

### Discuss:

1. Which person(s) stood out in my mind as I read the description of a great small-group host above?

2. What steps can our church take to identify and engage new small-group hosts?
3. How can our church better support hosts who are also serving as group leaders?

## Job Description: Small-Group Host

*The characteristics and duties of a great small-group host.*

1 Peter 4:8–9



The role of the host is critical to the success of any small group. Sometimes the leader also hosts the group, but often another person will open his or her home, freeing the leader to focus on teaching and managing the group. Although the host may appear to be of lesser importance than the leader, this is not true. These are two very different roles requiring different gifts—and both are essential to the success of the group. A prepared, relaxed, and welcoming environment will enhance the small-group experience for everyone. But this will only come through thoughtful preparation.

The structure of the group will determine requirements for the host and the meeting space. While many groups consist of 6 to 12 people meeting in a home, there are also other configurations. Some small groups meet at a church, a coffee shop, or other public place. Sometimes a larger group meets together for teaching, with smaller breakout groups or table hosts for discussion. Regardless of the group type, it's helpful for one person or couple to be designated as host and/or hostess—responsible for the physical space and the ambiance of the meeting.

I recommend that you adapt the following suggestions and guidelines to your unique situation.

### Personal Characteristics

**Objective:** Although the host is not the identified spiritual leader of the group, he or she still must maintain a strong personal walk with the Lord by practicing the spiritual disciplines necessary for spiritual fitness and for growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

### Goals:

1. Spend regular time reading the Bible, pursuing personal growth and maturity.
2. Practice a consistent prayer life that focuses on praise, thanksgiving, personal needs, the needs of believers, and the needs of the lost.
3. Spend time in spiritual fellowship with others for the purposes of mutual love, encouragement, and growth.
4. Be involved in fulfilling the Great Commission by reaching out to the lost, both in word and deed.
5. Develop and practice the heart of a servant.

### Duties Within the Small Group

**Objective:** To provide a physical and emotional setting that is conducive for a small group of believers to grow toward maturity in Christ.

### Goals:

1. **Be prepared to welcome members 20 to 30 minutes before the meeting.** This will create a welcoming environment for early arrivals, as well as for leaders, apprentices, and table leaders, who should arrive early to prepare, pray, and settle before the other group members get there.

2. **Spiritually cleanse the meeting space** by praying for a removal of any defilement left by others who have been in the space, as well as by sin, arguments, and tension. Bring the peace of the Holy Spirit into the room. This is essential for public space, but is also important in a home.
3. **Provide and/or set up comfortable seating for the number of members and guests expected.** Work with the leader to ensure that the set-up accommodates his or her leadership style. For example, will the leader need tables or a white board?
4. **Eliminate as many distractions as possible.** These might include:
  - *Children.* If yours is not a family group, members must agree upon the policy for children. As the host, make sure that your own children are able to safely and quietly play or sleep without creating distractions for the group members. This would include crying, music, TV, telephones, quarrels, and other noise. Children running in and out of the room also create a confidentiality issue.
  - *Pets.* Unless you know that everyone in your group loves Rover and Puff, make sure they are in another room and not barking, jumping at the door, or otherwise creating a nuisance. Also, if you have pets, make sure that no one in your group is allergic. If they are, can you still host the meeting? Is a thorough vacuuming sufficient?
  - *Telephones.* Hopefully, the group leader will ask people to silence their cell phones during the meeting. You can help by allowing voicemail to answer your home telephone. Jumping up to answer every phone call communicates that the unidentified caller is more important than the group.
  - *Odors.* Don't cook fish or cabbage on small-group night. Change the kitty litter. Some hosts light a scented candle, which can add a pleasant fragrance, but be sure the candle is smokeless and that no one has fragrance allergies.
5. **Provide a space and service for refreshments, if necessary.** Depending on your group, this may include providing (and preparing in advance of arrival) the coffee, tea, or water; providing plates and forks; and perhaps arranging a centerpiece or some other welcoming focal point. I recommend that hosts share the load for refreshments by rotating that responsibility among all group members. Keep a list and, if necessary, e-mail a weekly reminder.  
If your budget is tight, don't hesitate to ask for help with food and beverages. If attendance varies, ask people to confirm by noon if they plan to attend (or not). This will reduce wasted food. And consider hosting a potluck from time to time.
6. **Coordinate with your leader** to determine schedules and the type of space that will help accomplish the goals for the group.

—PAT J. SIKORA; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### Discuss:

1. Based on the information about, do I have the potential to serve effectively as a small-group host?
2. Which of the characteristics or skills listed above do I do well? Which will need to improve as I begin to serve?
3. What steps can our church take to develop and train other small-group hosts?

## Standards of Performance: Small-Group Host



*What churches and groups should expect from a great small-group host.*

Romans 12:6–8

### Relationships

1. **Relationship with God.** The small-group host:
  - a. Spends regular time in prayer and reading God's Word.
  - b. Is a growing believer (Reflect on Luke 8:14, Ephesians 4:13, Colossians 4:12, James 1:4).
  
2. **Relationship to the Church.** The small-group host:
  - a. Is committed to the church and to the small group.
  - b. Is willing to be held accountable.
  
3. **Relationships with Others.** The small-group host:
  - a. Has a strong and loving relationship with family.
  - b. Has a good reputation in the community and in the workplace.
  - c. Demonstrates a gift of or interest in hospitality (Reflect on Romans 12:13, 16:23; 1 Peter 4:9).
  - d. Shares faith and has an interest in evangelism if that is a focus in the group.

### Ministry Skills

1. **Hospitality.** The small-group host:
  - a. Understands and is able to demonstrate the difference between entertaining and hospitality.
  - b. Understands how physical space and ambiance contribute to an effective small-group experience.
  - c. Is able to help members and guests feel welcome and cared for.
  - d. Is willing and able to use personal resources to create a hospitable environment, recognizing that sometimes personal possessions will be damaged.
  - e. Is willing and able to maintain a comfortably clean home, especially the meeting space and restroom(s).

2. **Small-Group Dynamics.** The small-group host:
  - a. Demonstrates love and concern for each group member. (Reflect on 1 Corinthians 12:25; Philippians 2:3.)
  - b. Is able to facilitate relationships within the group and help each person feel welcome and cared for.
  - c. Is generally warm, friendly, kind, and welcoming to both friends and strangers.
  - d. Has the heart and attitude of a servant.
  
3. **Knowledge.** The small-group host:
  - a. Has a good understanding of the gospel message and how it applies to the group and the ministry of hospitality.
  - b. Understands and supports the doctrines, ministry philosophy, strategies, and direction of the church.
  - c. Understands the nature of the small group and its goals.
  - d. Knows the demographics of our community and is willing to host a diverse range of people.

— PAT J. SIKORA; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International.

**Discuss:**

1. What skills do I possess that will help me meet the expectations above?
2. Which of the expectations listed above will be hardest for me to meet?
3. What steps can our church take to help prepare me and other hosts for these duties?

## Advice from an Experienced Host

*What churches and groups should expect from a great small-group host.*

Philemon 1:2



*Vaughn and Jaime Stoll have been small-group hosts for over six years now with Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, FL.*

### **SmallGroups.com: Tell us a little bit about your small group.**

**Vaughn:** Right now we have 26 people, and they're mostly couples. Some people have kids, some people don't, and the age range is anywhere from the low 20's to upper 30's. We meet once a week, and currently we're meeting on Wednesday evening. People usually get there around 7 o'clock, and we try to wrap up at about 9.

### **How do you split up the time?**

**Vaughn:** We have about 30 or 40 minutes of social interaction, which includes some food. Then we have about an hour for Bible study, and that sometimes goes for an extra 15 minutes or so.

### **And what about location—does the group meet in your home?**

**Jaime:** We've actually done a few different things with this group over the years. There have been a few periods when we always met in our home; there was another period of time where we were actually rotating homes to take the burden away of always having it at one home. And we've recently started having it at the home of another group member.

### **You mentioned that several couples in the group have children. How do you handle childcare?**

**Vaughn:** Yeah, childcare is always a challenge, and we didn't have any outside help for several years. But as the group developed, more and more people had kids, so childcare became a pretty important issue. When we started, we set it up so that one parent stayed with the kids while the rest of us did the study. But that actually didn't work very well. It separated the group having someone always gone, especially going through relationship studies when someone's spouse would be missing.

So we eventually contacted a couple of girls that work in our church nursery, and they babysit for us. We just all split up the cost as a group. And now that the group has become so large, we've taken another step. We have our Bible study in a subdivision that has a clubhouse, so anyone who has kids leaves them at the house with the babysitter, and we go and have our study at the clubhouse.

### **What are your main responsibilities with the small group?**

**Vaughn:** Jaime is the primary coordinator for the group. She sends out all the e-mail reminders, which are pretty regular. Probably once or twice a week she e-mails everyone just to let them know what's going on with the group, when we're meeting, if we're doing any social activities, and things like that. And that's been great for keeping the group more connected.

And then my main responsibility is leading the discussion. We typically use a video series that has about half an hour of some kind of teaching, and then usually another half hour of discussion. So I try to preview the video ahead of time so that I'll know what to expect and can help keep the discussion going.

**So different people bring food each week?**

**Vaughn:** Yeah. It's not real formal, but the dessert goes through a rotation where everyone takes a turn.

**Jaime, what is your primary method for contacting everyone in your group?**

**Jaime:** With such a large group, I definitely use e-mail a lot. But if there's a newer couple in the group, or if I know someone is going through a tough time, I'll try to touch base on the phone.

**What's something you've learned after hosting a group for several years that you wish you'd known when you started?**

**Vaughn:** The childcare thing was definitely a big issue. We've found that it's pretty hard to have childcare in the home during a group meeting. There's just so many distractions when kids are in the same house. They know their parents are close, so it can be very hard for them to stay upstairs or stay in a certain room. I know that groups have done it that way successfully, but for us, having a separate babysitter in a separate location has been a lot better.

**What were some of the other challenges that have popped up when you host the group in your home?**

**Jaime:** Sometimes it can be a little difficult making sure your house is always cleaned up and everything is picked up and put away before the group gets there. I know that when we've held the group in other people's homes, we've told them not to worry about that kind of thing too much. But I think it's just a natural tendency to want to have things as neat as possible when people are coming over.

And it is a commitment to have everything organized and arranged in terms of getting chairs set up and food and dishes out. But everyone in our group has been pretty helpful when it comes to pitching in with cleaning up.

**It sounds like the two of you have been doing this for several years now, but what got you started?**

**Vaughn:** Actually, the biggest thing was that we couldn't find any other groups of people our age, or in our life circumstance at the time. Most of the other groups had people in their 40s, or with older kids, and we didn't even have children yet. So we decided to start our own.

**Jaime:** We started by inviting a few people that we already had relationships with, and ever since then we've been growing slowly, but consistently. As we've met people in church or in our neighborhood that are similar in age, we've just invited them to come and give it a try. We've also had group members invite co-workers and their spouses, and they started coming regularly.

**And what do you enjoy most about hosting your group?**

**Jaime:** I'd definitely say it's been building these relationships. I honestly believe that my best and closest friends are in this group. They're the people I do things with, and the people I turn to when problems pop up.

—VAUGHN AND JAIME STOLL; copyright 2009 by the authors and Christianity Today International.

**Discuss:**

1. What potential challenge would I be most worried about if I were to host a small group?
2. What potential benefit of hosting a group excites me the most?
3. Which of the experiences and tips mentioned above could be applied to a small group that I host?

## Hosting with Excellence

*Practical tips for those learning to serve as small-group hosts.*

Romans 12:13



The most important ministry a host can accomplish is to help group members feel completely welcomed and wanted. Hosts are likely to be the first people with whom newcomers come in contact, so they have a tremendous opportunity to initiate an atmosphere of love and acceptance to all who walk through their doors. Hosting a small group is an honor, and it should be done with a commitment to excellence.

With the preceding in mind, consider the following tips for hosting a small group:

1. **Be prepared.** The first task of a small-group host is to greet people when they come to the door. Newcomers are often the first to show up, and their first impression of a small group is critical. An excellent host will be ready well in advance of the starting time to greet people as they arrive.
2. **Greet everyone warmly.** People come to a small group with any number of things on their mind. Some come from work. Others rushed out of the house while scarfing down a sandwich. A warm greeting from the host can help people shift their mindset and prepare for a small-group setting. And an encouraging word can set the tone for an enjoyable evening.
3. **Strike up a conversation.** This is especially important for new people. Ask a few questions, like: “Where do you live?” “How did you hear about our small group?” “How is your week going?”
4. **Be sure you are well supplied.** Check to be sure you have plenty of pencils, paper, Bibles, study guides, and so forth. Always have an extra chair or two. Running out of supplies could send a message that there isn’t enough room for someone in your group.
5. **Pay attention to the details.** The following may seem a bit trivial, but careful attention to these items will display an extra concern for your group members.
  - a. *Arrange for the seating to be at the same level.* Try not to have some people sitting on the floor and others on the couch. People sitting at different levels cuts down on eye contact, which diminishes discussion.
  - b. *Don’t forget the munchies!* Food is a great catalyst for community-building. Plan to have light snacks or dessert following your Bible discussion. Starting a sign-up sheet for snacks is a great way to get people more involved in the group.
  - c. *Check the lighting.* Be sure the room where the Bible discussion is to be held is well lit. One way to check this is to arrange the seating for the evening, turn on the lights to be used, take your Bible to the various sections of the room, and see if you can read easily.
  - d. *Adjust the temperature.* A room that is too cold can make it very difficult for people to get comfortable. They will be less likely to linger for fellowship. A room that is too hot can cause people to tire easily.
  - e. *Eliminate distractions.* Put your pets (especially dogs and cats) in a separate room for the evening. Let the answering machine pick up your calls and secure a babysitter to watch the children.

— JOHN FERGUSON; copyright 1996 by the author and [SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com).

**Discuss:**

1. When have I gone to a person's home and felt very comfortable? What helped me relax and join the conversation?
2. When have I gone to a person's home and felt very uncomfortable? What distracted or annoyed me?
3. What steps can I take to improve the experience of the small-group members who meet in my home?

## Creating a Great Small-Group Atmosphere



*Use your five senses to ensure that your meeting area will uplift your small group.*

3 John 5–8

The poet Stephen Spender wrote, “There is always a tendency of the body to sabotage the attention of the mind by providing some distraction.” Who understands that better than the person in a small-group meeting unable to focus on spiritual matters because of an uncomfortable atmosphere?

Atmosphere is important to aiding interaction in a small group. You can bet that if a room is too hot, too cold, too bright, or too dim, discussion will suffer. The following is a list of advice I’ve gathered. These are applicable if you meet in a classroom, a living room, or a kitchen.

### Sight

In general, lamplight provides a better ambiance than overhead lights, but make sure to experiment with lamp placement so that you can fill in the shadows around one lamp with the light cast from another. Here are some other useful tips:

- **Meet in a circle**, where everyone can see the face of every other person in the group. A circle helps everyone participate equally. If you have a couch in the living room where you meet, either do not use it at all or make sure only two people sit on it. Couches kill conversation, says Lyman Coleman, because the people on the ends have to talk “past” the person in the middle, and they cannot see each other easily.
- **Be sure everyone sits at an even height.** Again, this helps everyone be able to share equally, without any feelings of superiority or inferiority.
- **Let your light shine.** But not too brightly. Low lighting is preferred over bright florescent lights—just be sure everyone, especially older members, can see their booklets. Lyman Coleman suggests that if you use a classroom, bring several table lamps and use them rather than the overhead lighting. This makes for a nice, homey atmosphere rather than a cold, sterile one.

### Sound

I recommend that group hosts play soft music as people arrive, but turn it off before the group begins. Also, guard against possible distractions once the meeting starts. Turn telephone ringers off (unless parents with small children at babysitters need to be contacted in an emergency). Put pets in another room, and see if children can play or learn in a different section of the house. Of course, turn off radios, TV sets, computers, and the like during a meeting.

### Smell

We can get so accustomed to the smells in our home that we don’t notice them anymore: pet odors, last night’s dinner, heavy perfumes, even some room deodorants. As a host, you need to compensate for what might smell good to you, but is obnoxious to others.

- **Sniff around.** Obnoxious odors can kill a good discussion. Particularly if you have pets or young children (like mine) who tend to spill things in the oddest places, you might want to check the smell as you enter the house.
- **Set up a fan** to pull air out of your meeting room, providing good ventilation.
- **Use smells to your advantage.** Research has shown, for instance, that the smell of peppermint helps keep people alert.

### Taste

Straight-from-the-oven brownies, popcorn or a beautifully-arranged tray of fruit do more than encourage group interaction. They let people know you want them there and planned ahead.

### Touch

A comfortable room with one person in it may be uncomfortable when 12 warm bodies are added. One expert suggests 67 degrees as an ideal room temperature for groups. Keep in mind that everyone has different comfort levels when it comes to temperature, and if possible, meet in a room where temperature can be adjusted easily. Also:

- **Physical touch.** Perhaps more important than room temperature is a physical brush, the human touch—a hug or warm handshake. Even the apostle Paul knew its importance. As he told the Christians at Thessalonica: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”
- **Meet in a room comfortable for the size of the group.** A small group may feel intimidated in a large meeting room. Individuals in a group of 12 may feel claustrophobic in a very small room.
- **Sit close.** Kent Odor says that a “knee-to-knee group” is best.

—MIKE MACK; copyright 1998 by the author and [SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com).

### Discuss:

1. Which of the five senses has our small-group meeting area appealed to well?
2. Which of the five senses has our meeting area neglected?
3. What steps can we take to improve the atmosphere of our small group?

## Common Obstacles of a Small-Group Host

*And practical ideas for overcoming them.*

Matthew 25:37–40



The Holy Spirit has given some people the spiritual gift of hospitality—a natural bent to creating an exhilarating environment. They intuitively long to make every person in attendance feel at ease. From the moment group members walk through the front door right up to the time each individual turns the ignition in their vehicle and exits the subdivision, the host experiences a healthy tension that drives him or her to make their home everyone’s home.

Whether or not you have this gift, you can still be an effective host. And even the person with the gift of hospitality has some mountains to climb. These obstacles can easily be overcome with the right understanding, delegation of duties, and some careful planning.

Here are some examples:

### Time

For many small-group hosts, time is the highest hurdle of all—finding time to clean the house, prepare food, set up seating, and so on. This is especially true if the host home is made up of a husband and wife who both work, or who have children (or both!). It is even more difficult for the single person who hosts a small group.

Still, there are ways that any host can be effective without killing themselves.

- **Plan ahead.** Too many hosts begin to think about the group’s arrival—and all that must be done in preparation—a day or two before the group meeting. They find themselves sprinting through life, often aggravated that the group is coming. There’s a house to be cleaned; a meal to be planned; food to be purchased, prepared, and served; reminders to be sent; and if time allows, prayers to be prayed. By the time the group shows up, the host doesn’t have the energy to exhibit love.

But if hosts plan ahead, they can involve other group members in the process, and this is always positive. For example, get someone in the group to watch your kids while you clean. This will give the host time to prepare the house without multi-tasking. Or, have someone join you for cleaning and setting up the house. You’ll build deeper relationships while you work, and the two of you will be more efficient. Plus, you can finish early and watch a movie! You can also coordinate efforts with our spouse. Ask your husband or wife to take the kids somewhere fun while you prepare the house for the meeting.

- **Don’t be obsessive.** Too many small-group hosts forget that the people in the group are family. They over-decorate, over-clean, overdo the meal, and underestimate the power of letting the group do real life with them. They prepare the house and food and table settings as though the editor of Good Housekeeping is going to be at the meeting.

God never expected perfection in your actions or your housekeeping—especially when your imperfect peers are coming by. Agree with your group members at your first meeting that the house may not be perfect, but it is open to them so that you can do life together. They will be honored, not disgusted.

## The Meal

For many hosts, the meal is a massive undertaking. No doubt this is especially true if the host senses a responsibility to cook for everyone every week. One word—don't! Don't cook for everyone every week. One of the most important things a host can do is delegate responsibility and involve every household in the meal. This unifies the group and establishes a community built on the essential principle of equality.

Here are a few strategies:

- **Households take turns preparing and bringing the meal.** This way, each household will only have to be concerned with the meal once every four or five weeks.
- **Divvy out responsibilities for next week's meal.** Ask someone to bring the main dish, someone else to bring something green, someone else the bread, and so on.
- **Go out to dinner sometimes.** If you do this, be sure you go someplace that everyone can afford.
- **For a change of pace, coordinate efforts with another small group.** Take a meal to them the night of their meeting and let them do the same for you. You'll be shocked at how relaxing this will be to your group, as no one has to rush home, prepare food, and show up at the meeting frazzled.
- **Some of the group members come early and prepare the meal together.** This can be a great bonding experience.

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Everyone doesn't have time to go home and cook before the meeting.** Tell group members that picking up a pizza, going to the local deli, and so on are just as good as cooking something themselves.
- **Every household is not equal when it comes to finances.** Be sensitive to group members who cannot afford to bring the most expensive items or prepare a meal for the entire group.

These ideas will save you money, involve other members in the group (sparking better attendance), deepen relationships, and allow you to come to the group meeting more relaxed. You'll be ready to experience the same level of conversation, understanding of Scripture, and life-change that others are experiencing.

## Childcare

Need I say more? Childcare may be the most perplexing question of all. There is no perfect situation, but you will find some systems that can work well.

- **All the small groups from one church meet on the same night, and childcare is handled at the church building.** This sounds perfect, but it often overworks the church staff. It also keeps those doing childcare from being in a small group, and it demands that groups end on time.
- **Adults and children meet at the same house—adults in one room, children with childcare in another.** This can be done in various ways. 1) Group members take turns babysitting the kids. 2) The group pools money to pay babysitters that come to the house. 3) Make a deal with another small group. They send childcare to your group meeting weekly and you do the same for them.
- **Adults meet in a home no more than a three minute drive from the home where the children are being watched.** The group pools resources to pay for childcare at a home close by. In this instance, be sure that one cell phone is left on, the childcare team has the phone number, and when that phone rings everything going on at the time stops to see if there is an emergency.
- **Every group member takes care of their own childcare at their own home.**

## All the Rest

Sometimes a host can have a perfectly clean and organized home, serve the perfect meal, have childcare down pat—and end the evening still realizing that “something just wasn't right.” They can't put their finger on it, but they know in their spirit that things were just slightly off balance.

Little things are what keep the big things from being accomplished. If you'll deal with the little things below, you'll reap big rewards.

- **Engage all the senses from the moment people arrive.**
  - *Hearing.* As group members arrive, have appropriate music playing. It should be at a volume that still allows conversation between group members.
  - *Smell.* A scented candle will relax the room and engage the sense of smell (be sure to check for fragrance allergies first).
  - *Taste.* Have coffee or soft drinks available for people when they arrive.
  - *Touch.* As people show up, welcome them with a handshake, hug, or pat on the back.
- **Pets.** Do not allow pets to run around the house during the small-group meeting. They may be family to you, but they may be an allergy or a source of fear to someone else.
- **Phones.** Phones are “the great interrupters” in small groups today. If you can silence your land-line phone, do so, and turn off your answering machine. Have group members turn off their cell phones during the meeting.
- **Lighting.** Make sure lights are bright enough that attendees can see to read.
- **Set the room temperature at 69 degrees.** When people fill the room, the temperature will rise to 71.
- **Make sure the seating is set up so that every person in the group can see every other group member’s eyes.**

— RICK HOWERTON; copyright 2009 by the author and Christianity Today International

**Discuss:**

1. Which of the obstacles listed above have I experienced? How did I overcome them?
2. How well does our small group do at involving several members in preparing meals and caring for children? How can we improve?
3. What three tips above will help me the most in the coming weeks as I host my small group?

## Sharing a Meal

*Take a minute to consider this natural and effective tool for building community.*

Acts 2:46–47



I made a crazy decision this semester: “let’s have dinner at group every week.” What possessed me to do that? I’m not sure. Maybe it was the fear of never eating until 10 p.m. on Thursdays. Maybe it was an impulse because I was feeling hungry at the first meeting. I’m sure it was a combination of things, but I hope that the primary reason was that I wanted to jump headfirst into radical hospitality for my small group. From everything I had read and studied and prayed about in preparation for the group, I knew that sitting around a table and chowing down would build community faster than our most ardent theological discussions.

Has it been chaotic? Absolutely. Has it added a new layer of complexity to the group? No question. Am I glad we did it? I can’t believe we don’t require it for every group at my church. Here are some ideas and guidelines for incorporating meals into your small group:

- **Delegate.** Put someone in charge of meals. A person with a gift of helps or administration can set up a schedule and get people to volunteer.
- **Make it easy.** This is not an Iron Chef competition! Try to make the main point about the fellowship, not the food itself. Create an environment where everyone—whether they can cook or not—gets to participate. We are quite lucky in our group to have a number of very skilled and talented chefs (who all happen to be men), and the past three meetings have been amazing. But I’m planning to scale it down several notches tonight. Here are some ideas for keeping it simple:
  - Ordering pizza is fine.
  - Think about having a breakfast night—serve pancakes or have a cereal buffet.
  - Have a deli bar or salad bar.
  - Our group even joked about bringing McDonald’s double cheeseburgers one night. Well, it started as a joke—then turned quite serious!
- **Get everyone involved. Have everyone sign up to bring the meal for a night.** Or go the potluck route. Also, consider having one night where everyone is assigned a different ingredient, and then cook the meal together as a group.
- **Be sensitive to time.** The hardest part about doing meals at group is balancing the time. We decided to start our group 30 minutes earlier to allow people to eat. Then, we officially start the discussion, but latecomers can grab their meal and eat during the discussion time.
- **Be sensitive to dietary preferences and allergic restrictions.**
- **Have fun and be creative.** Consider having some theme nights. Open up your group to serve a meal to the homeless one night. Do a progressive dinner from home to home of various group members. Pick a restaurant and move your group there for a week.

Remember—the most important thing about sharing a meal is the community that develops, not the food itself. I strongly recommend that you find a way to incorporate a shared meal into your small group, whether it’s once a week, once a month, or once a semester.

— HEATHER ZEMPEL; adapted from The Zone Gathering blog, copyright 2008 by the author and National Community Church

**Discuss:**

1. What positive experiences have I had sharing a meal in someone's home? What made them positive?
2. What negative experiences have I had sharing a meal in someone's home? What made them negative?
3. What are two things I can do in our next small-group meeting to pull off a successful meal?

## The Childcare Conundrum

*Here is an overview of the many ways to include children within your community.*

Matthew 19:14



For churches wanting to include younger families in small groups, childcare will always be one of the larger obstacles. But there is hope. Several options do exist for successfully accommodating children within a small-group setting.

### Overview of common options

Here are some common options when children participate with adults in the group:

1. Children remain present with adults for the entire meeting.
2. Children remain present with adults for part of the meeting, and then break into a separate group in a separate room. Children can develop their own small group, participate in an activity (such as a Veggie Tales video), or enjoy a supervised time of free play.
3. Children join the adults every other meeting, or once a month. Children and adults meet separately during the other weeks.
4. Children and adults meet separately for the entire meeting.

Here are some common options when a babysitter is involved:

1. Adults work together to arrange a babysitter for all of the children in the group. Payment is split between the entire group, or between only those bringing children.
2. A babysitter cares for most of the children during the group meeting, but nursing infants are allowed to remain with adults.
3. Outside of the small group, each parent arranges for the care of their own children through a relative or sitter.
4. Young adults or teenagers from the church's youth ministry volunteer to care for the children of your small group as an act of service.
5. Young adults or teenagers from the church's youth ministry care for the children of your small group and are paid for their work.

Here are some common options when childcare is arranged within the small group:

1. Each small-group member cares for the children on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly rotation.
2. Only those participants who have children in the group provide childcare on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly rotation.
3. Participants of other small groups at your church (ones that meet during a different time of the week) rotate to provide childcare for your small group, which returns the service.

## How to build a life-changing children's small group

Several of the above options involve children coming together for their own small-group experience. This can be a great way to solve the childcare problem and advance each child's spiritual development at the same time. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- A children's small group should not exceed eight children. You will need two adults to lead this many children.
- To prevent the small group from feeling like a school classroom, have the children sit on cushions and face each other in a circle. Consider bringing props or decorations to make the room fun and exciting.
- Develop a list ground rules (core values and practices) and have each child commit to follow them at all times.
- Prepare and share food together with children.
- Allow friends to stay together, but encourage the children to interact with everyone at each meeting.
- Make a special time for each child to share about his or her week with the rest of the group.
- For part of the group time, encourage children to pray for one another and with one another.
- Play lively Christian music in the background, or sing worship songs together as a group.

A central part of any children's small group is the lesson. Children will learn best when a leader is able to strike a balance between the extremes of boring lecture and empty activity. Here are a few tips to help achieve that balance:

- Have the children perform a puppet show or skit for the adult members of the small group. If you're really brave, ask the adults to do the same for the children.
- Help the children create a watercolor painting, clay sculpture, or drawing that is based on a biblical story.
- Lead a nature walk through a local park and teach about God's creation. Invite the children to collect interesting things along the way. You could even expand this into a scavenger hunt.
- Oversee the development of a scrapbook by all of the children in the group.
- As a group, help the children compose a worship song or act out a Bible story. It's often entertaining to record these creations on video and play them back for the children to watch and discuss.
- For a lesson on prayer, have a child share a special need or desire. Invite the other children to lay hands on him or her and pray.

Each week, or every other week, introduce an adult small-group participant to the children. Have the adult share briefly about who they are, what they do, and how they came to know Jesus.

— REID SMITH; *Copyright © 2007 Christianity Today International. Used with permission from [Smallgroups.com](http://Smallgroups.com).*

### Discuss:

1. Which of the childcare options listed at the beginning of the article are a good fit for our group? Why?
2. Does our church have the resources (people, money, and time) to provide childcare for our small group?
3. When our group teaches children, are we able to craft a lesson that is neither boring lecture nor empty activity? In what ways can our lessons improve?

## **Further Exploration**

*Websites and books to help train and direct small-group hosts.*



[SmallGroups.com](http://SmallGroups.com). Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International.

- ["Small-Group Leader Orientation Guide"](#)
- ["Meaningful Worship in Small Groups"](#)
- ["Becoming a Great Listener"](#)

[LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net). This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Coach: Empower Others to Effectively Lead a Small Group** by *Joel Comiskey*. Influential small-groups author Joel Comiskey brings trusted research and practical advice to discuss coaching group leaders (CCS Publishing, 2007; ISBN 0979067914).

**Creating Community** by *Andy Stanley and Bill Willits*. Five key discoveries that have helped North Point Community Church connect over 8,000 people through small groups (Multnomah, 2005; ISBN 978-1590523964).

**Destination: Community** by *Rick Howerton*. A ministry manual to help you lead a dynamic and redemptive small group (Serendipity House, 2007; ISBN 978-1-5749-4352-8).

**I'm a Leader...Now What?** by *Michael Mack*. Practical advice on how to guide and maintain an effective small group (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720769).

**Making Small Groups Work** by *Henry Cloud and John Townsend*. This book provides small-group leaders with valuable guidance and information on how they can help their groups to grow spiritually, emotionally, and relationally (Zondervan; ISBN 978-0310255123).