

A group of young men are sitting in a circle on a ship, engaged in conversation. The background shows the interior of a ship with white walls and a window. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

Small Group Leader 101

Student Ministries



Our Hope for Small Groups

In Student Ministries, we are empowered by God to reach others for Christ by helping students become his lifelong followers. We do this best by focusing on two wins:

- Creating engaging experiences
- Building relationships that transform lives

The way we accomplish our two wins in small groups is by creating belonging, helping student grow in their faith, and providing support and encouragement.

Create Belonging

- Students want a sense of belonging, and they look to the people around them to find that.
- For some students, your small group may be the only place they are in community with other Christians. You create belonging for these students when you make them feel welcomed and included in your group.
 - You, as a leader, can make church a place where every student feels they belong.

Help Students Grow in Their Faith

- When students come to Ground Zero or Revolution, they will grow in their faith through messages, worship, and small group time.
- Throughout the year, you will help each student grow in their faith in many different ways:
 - You play a vital role in helping them connect messages to real-life situations in small group discussion.
 - You will help students answer questions about God, identity, love, and so much more. If you don't know the answers, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, let me figure that out."
 - Other ways you can help students grow in their faith is through outside resources:
 - The YouVersion Bible App has reading plans for all ages.
 - RightNow Media is a great resource for video content.
 - The Bible Project has summaries of Bible stories illustrated in a fun way for students.
- Accountability is important when you're helping students grow in their faith. Holding your group accountable will take time, and first, you need to establish a relationship with your students.
 - As you get to know your students, you will learn how best to hold them accountable and what they need to be held accountable for. Remember, your job as a small group leader is to point them to Christ.



Our Hope for Small Groups

Provide Support and Encouragement

- We all know life isn't easy, and the life of a student is no different. Students are busy juggling school, extracurriculars, friendships, and family. Church should feel like a place where they can unload the weights they're carrying and experience support.
- You have the opportunity to support and encourage your students and invite your whole small group to do the same for their peers.
 - You can support students by offering encouraging words, praying for and with them, and sending encouraging texts or verses to your group.
 - Never underestimate a small comment of encouragement. For example, if you see one of your students is more engaged in small group discussions, don't be afraid to let them know their input made a positive impact on the group.

The 5 Essentials of Student Ministries

These are tips to help you be the best you can be to ultimately lead students closer to Christ.

Fill Up First

- Your relationship with Jesus has a huge impact on your group. If you aren't growing in your faith, it's unlikely that you'll be ready or equipped to lead others to grow in theirs.
- We all fall short, and this is when you can ask your group for **accountability**. Ask your group to do a Bible reading together or ask them to join you at church on the weekend. This will not only help you but also help your students **grow in their faith**.

Time on Their Turf

- Meeting your students where they are means truly knowing the heart and story of each student in your group.
- Practice providing **support and encouragement** by showing up for your students in environments that are personal to them. Attending games, recitals, plays, or ceremonies with the rest of the group or your co-leader will build relationships and help your students feel like they belong.
- One personal connection = 10 nights of small group.

Get in the Game

- Be ready to show up for your students, because you may be the only consistent adult in their lives that is pointing them to Jesus. Consistency helps students to know and trust that they will see you regularly.
- Showing up each week creates trust, accelerates community, and builds common ground. All these things will help **create belonging** and build your relationships with your students so you can hold each other **accountable**.



Our Hope for Small Groups

Enjoy the Journey

- Your group is not a list of problems to be solved, but people to be loved.
- People and life are messy; students in your small group are no exception. Remember to be flexible as you walk through the journey with your group.
- When a student trusts you with their journey, you have the opportunity to **support and encourage** them, as well as have conversations and accountability that will help them **grow in their faith**.

Be Authentic

- While volunteering in Student Ministries, you may feel the need to be the “cool, hip, loud” leader, but we don’t need cool; we need your authentic self.
- Allowing students to see you as authentic and unique **creates belonging** for students and helps when asking for **accountability** in small groups.



Setting Expectations

Setting clear expectations for your small group will help you avoid behavior issues before they even start. You can set your small group up for success by establishing expectations early and reminding students often of these expectations.

Consider the following topics when discussing expectations for your group:

Confidentiality

- Students may attend the same schools, so it is important to set the expectation that things shared in small group should not leave small group. This protects students and allows for more open and vulnerable conversations.
- There may be times when you can't keep things confidential because the student is harming themselves or in an unsafe situation. Follow the mandated reporting process for such situations or reach out to your pastor of Student Ministries.

Communication

- Having communication with your small group outside of a Wednesday nights is important. Define how you will communicate updates to your group.
- When communicating with students, there are boundaries you need to consider for your safety and the safety of the students.
 - To encourage transparency and integrity, do not delete digital communication with students, and group texts are encouraged.
 - Recommended tools for communication include texting, GroupMe, emails, or postcards. Avoid using social media to message students, especially Snapchat where messages can be deleted easily.
 - GroupMe is a great tool for group texting because you can easily add and remove members as your group changes throughout the year.
- Try to avoid one-on-one text messages with students, and bring your co-leader into any conversation you can.
- Use wisdom on what time you are messaging students as well.
- 1 Timothy 3:2 "So a church leader must be a person whose life is above reproach."



Setting Expectations

Create Community

- Community will look different for each group, but here are some expectations that every group can benefit from:
 - Set expectations for small group time.
 - When large group is over, students should head to their small group quickly without excessive stops on the way at the bathroom, drinking fountain, lobby games, etc.
 - When small group time starts, students should be paying attention and contributing to the conversation.
 - Set expectations for small group discussion.
 - One student should be talking at a time while other students listen and provide input when it's their turn.
 - Set Expectations for fun.
 - I know setting expectations for fun is not really...fun, but setting the expectation for when it's time for fun and when it's time to be serious will help your group in the long run.



Facilitating a Great Discussion

As a small group leader, your primary role is to facilitate discussions for your students. If you are talking more than your students, you're doing it wrong. Here are some tips and tricks to help you as you prepare to lead a great discussion:

Start with a "round"

- Ask a question to your group, then go around the circle and allow each student a chance to respond.
- If you have a student who tends to monopolize the conversation, sit next to that person, and start the question going in the other direction to help demonstrate appropriate sharing.

Divide your group into subgroups

- Break your group into 2 or 3 smaller subgroups to discuss a question or set of questions.
- Subgroups give group members more time to share and can increase vulnerability in your group.
- After some time, bring the group back together and ask each subgroup what they discussed and learned, or you can move on to the next question.
 - Pro tip: Plan ahead for how you will split your group to ensure each group is balanced.

Pause and reflect

- After asking a question, have your group take a set amount of time to reflect on the question before sharing their perspective.
 - Pro tip: Bring paper and pens for students to write as they reflect on the question.

Ask directly

- Ask a question directly to a student who has shared something insightful in the past.
- Be sure not to pressure someone to respond or put them on the spot—but asking directly shows you value their thoughts and opinions.

Allow for silence

- Research shows that a deep question can take 6 seconds or more of silence before someone is ready to respond. When you ask a question, allow for 5-10 seconds of silence before rephrasing the question or moving on.



Facilitating a Great Discussion

Empower students to lead

- Your students are more than capable of helping lead the small group discussion, but you will need to empower them.
 - One way you can empower your students is by giving them the discussion guides so they can ask the questions to their peers.
 - Empower students to pray in small group by asking one person to pray or having them each pray for each other.



Caring for Group Members

Caring for students shouldn't be complicated. Here are some things you should know, see, and love about your students:

Their name

- When you **know** a student's name, it shows how much you care. Start this early by having everyone introduce themselves, even if you've led this group for years. Don't be afraid to do this every week.
- Using students' names when you see them—whether in the lobby, at church on the weekend, in small group, or on their turf—shows that you **see** and remember them.
 - Knowing a student's name shows them that they are worth remembering.
- A student may not say how important it was that you remembered their name, but it doesn't mean they didn't notice. This is showing them how you **love** them.

Their personality

- Learn each of your students' unique personalities. **Know** how they interact with their peers, leaders, parents, and themselves.
- When you know their personality, you can **see** when a student is feeling or behaving "off."
 - We often don't recognize when a student is in crisis or behaving differently unless we have invested time in getting to know them.
- When you are familiar with their personality and notice when they are behaving differently, you get to step in and **love them** through whatever they're going through.

What matters to them

- Get to **know** your students' interests and what matters most to them. Even if their interests seem silly, it's important to them, so it should be important to you, too.
- Understanding their interest leads to you being able to **see** them and connect on a personal level. When you take the time to understand what matters to your students, they will believe they matter too.
- Show your student you **love** them by asking them about their interests and listening to their responses.



Caring for Group Members

What they can do

- Students are far more capable than we give them credit for. Get to **know** what your students can do and how their skills can benefit the small group.
- When you know your students' strengths, you, as the leader, can highlight those abilities before they even realize them.
- Students need someone to believe in their potential, even if they don't see it themselves. Show you **love** your student by calling out their skills and talents. If you have a student who is a natural leader...tell them.

Another great way to care for the students in your small group is to follow up consistently with students who have missed small group. If you have a student who is usually showing up consistently but suddenly stops, here is how we hope to reengage them and care for them.

Step 1 – After missing 1 week

- If a student missing a week, try reaching out with a point of contact such as a text message, email, or postcard.
 - Students miss small group for various reasons like homework, sports/play practice, travel, or illness. If the student's response indicates that they will return in the future continue group communication as usual.
 - If a student is unable to attend consistently (for longer than a month) due to a schedule conflict, consider planning a group hang on another night or attend church together on the weekend.

Step 2 – After missing 3 weeks

- Invite them back, and involve your small group in the invitation process.
- If you have other students who are close friends with the absent student, ask those students to send a text or give them a postcard.

Step 3 – After missing 6 weeks

- If the student has not informed you of scheduling conflicts, send another postcard informing them of any upcoming events and letting them know they are welcome any time.
 - Before removing the student from the roster, consider saving their contact information.
 - If they have communicated a scheduling conflict or they wish to stay engaged, keep them in group communication.
- After sending the postcard, you can remove the student from your roster. You can add them back at any point, but this will help to keep your roster up to date and reflect accurate small group numbers.



Dealing With Difficult Group Members

Whether you're new to leading or you've been leading students for a while, you'll learn quickly that students' lives are messy, and often that messiness comes out in behavior issues. When addressing students' behaviors, you should be familiar with our discipline policy, but before that, here are a couple of things to consider:

The Individual

- When dealing with a difficult group member, it's important to understand their perspective. Student behaviors are often connected to other things going on in their lives outside of Wednesday.
- Plan a time to meet with this student before or after Wednesday night. When you meet with this student, remember to abide by the rule of three and consider asking your co-leader or team lead to join the conversation.
- Consider asking the student the following questions:
 - What is going on in your life right now?
 - What is going on at home?
 - What is your relationship with Jesus like?
- During this meeting, lovingly share how their behavior has been affecting the group, and explain what is expected of them going forward.
- Your primary role as a group leader is to facilitate discussion and foster community within your group, not fix people's problems. If a student is experiencing a particularly challenging time in their life, begins to act out more during small group, or says things that concern you, reach out to your pastor of Student Ministries.

Yourself

- When dealing with a difficult student, take some time to reflect on the following:
 - Where are *you* at?
 - What is *your* relationship with Jesus like?
 - Have *you* been reading your Bible and spending time with God?
 - What is going on in *your* life that might influence how you respond to group members?
- When you find yourself dealing with difficult people or situations, view it as an opportunity to draw closer to God and allow him to work through you.



Dealing With Difficult Group Members

Being familiar with the discipline policy will help us to create a safe and engaging environment where students can create transformational relationships.

Redirect

- When a student's behavior is disruptive to other students' experiences, the first step is to verbally redirect the student.
- Redirecting a student can be done through a conversation or with a simple comment to redirect the behavior.
- This step should be attempted multiple times before moving on to the next step.

Report

- If the behavior continues, involve your team lead or directors in the conversation.
- This will also include a discussion between your team lead/director and the student to clarify behavior expectations and next steps if the behavior continues.
- Inform your pastor of Student Ministries at this point, though their presence in the conversation is not required unless deemed necessary.

Remove

- If the behavior continues to be disruptive, the student will be asked to sit out the rest of the large group, small group, or be picked up early.
 - If the student needs to be picked up early, the volunteer or pastor of Student Ministries will call their guardian and fill out a behavior report form.
 - When parents arrive, the volunteer or pastor of Student Ministries will explain the reason for the student's removal, and the parent will need to sign the behavior report.
- The pastor of Student Ministries will determine how long the student will be suspended from attending Student Ministries depending on the behavior.

Restore

- We hope the student will be able to return to Student Ministries quickly.
- A conversation between your director, the pastor of Student Ministries, and the student must take place before allowing the student to return.



Thank you!

Without each of you, we wouldn't be able to help students become lifelong followers of Jesus. We hope that this is a valuable resource for you and your group this year. Remember, you don't have to be perfect—this guide is here for you to reference whenever you need a refresher. If you ever feel unsure or have questions, don't hesitate to reach out to your team leads, directors, or your pastor of Student Ministries.

Your role as a group leader is incredibly significant, and the impact you have on these students' lives is profound. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to Student Ministries this year.



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