



# LEADING SMALL GROUPS AT RESURRECTION

by PASTOR JUSTIN SCHOOLCRAFT

# WELCOME

From Justin Schoolcraft  
Small Groups and Young Adults Program Pastor



**HELLO!** The Adult Discipleship team is glad you are here. We are excited that you have expressed interest in becoming a small group leader – such a step is not taken lightly, and we thank you for this move towards leadership.

“Small groups” have become so commonplace in churches that many of us have taken for granted their significance. We forget that the Christian faith is best lived in relationship with other believers, and that these relationships have the power to change us. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, believed that God is uniquely at work in Christians’ lives through intentional, faithful conversations in small group settings. He even referred to spiritual conversations in group settings as a **means of grace** – meaning that God gives us the grace needed for growth and maturity through these conversations. Despite how commonplace small groups have become in churches, then, what is not commonplace is their power. We may *hear* the message of the Gospel at church, but small groups empower us through group dialogue to *become* that message for the world.

We try to enact this vision for Christian growth through our small groups here at Resurrection. **Resurrection small groups are communities of 5-15 people who meet regularly on the journey of becoming deeply committed Christians.** The word “becoming” is especially important to us. We try to create opportunities in our small groups for people to become deeply committed Christians. This journey of becoming is never over – it’s always deepening, always growing.

You likely recognize within that definition the influence of Resurrection’s purpose statement, “to build a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians.” Our vision and mission for small groups ministry happens within the context of this purpose statement. Growing as a Christian happens alongside the life of the collective Church and what God is doing through us to make our communities look more like the Kingdom of God. We believe small groups are a part of this purpose.

What we also recognize is that healthy small groups are cultivated when both leaders and participants commit to quality group practices. God is the one behind the spiritual growth that occurs in small groups, but God also works with leaders and participants to facilitate that growth. God wants to use *you* to lead people on this journey alongside other people so that we are living into our purpose. But other people can be tricky! There are personalities at play, group dynamics at work, and patterns of sharing that can be challenging. Behind all that trickiness, though, is the living God at work in a group.

This resource introduces you to 8 best practices for leading a small group. It is intended to be practical, and thus, examples abound. As you read, our hope is that it fills in some of the gaps when it comes to actually facilitating the discussion in your group, a sort of one-stop resource for managing conversation, personalities, and group dynamics. It is a reference for you to come back to over and over rather than a list for you to memorize.

As you prepare, lead, or develop your group, you are always welcome to reach out to me at [justin.schoolcraft@cor.org](mailto:justin.schoolcraft@cor.org). You are covered in prayer as you begin this journey. Perhaps John Wesley’s final words spoken before his death say it best – “Best of all, God is with us.”



It may seem trivial to say. You may be ready to jump at the details, review the plans, and master the skills. But before you proceed in becoming a small group leader, let me ask you an important question: Are you attending to your relationship with God?

That relationship is the most important thing. In my experience as a pastor, I can tell you there is nothing more important when it comes to leading a community of faith than attending to your own relationship with God. It is the wellspring from which healthy leadership and relationships flow.

The same is true for you as a small group leader. When you lead a small group, people will share their personal struggles with you. They will see you as a model of faith. This comes with a degree of responsibility.

**The expectation is not for you to be a super-Christian.** Instead, the hope is only that you are watering the roots of your faith, to use a plant analogy, keeping it well watered, nurtured, and pruned. If you are, you'll find that God's Spirit gives you the strength to respond gracefully when someone in your group says something that irritates you, to listen patiently even when you are exhausted, and to lead with confidence even if you feel insignificant.

So, this is the question to grapple with at the start: "Are you attending to your relationship with God?" At Resurrection we talk about the "Five Essential Practices" – worship, study, serve, give, and share. Are these practices part of your life? They go a long way towards cultivating that relationship.

## THE SMALL GROUP JOURNEY

Small group ministry at Resurrection occurs within the larger church's purpose, "to build a Christian community where non-religious and nominally religious people **are becoming deeply committed Christians.**" As mentioned in the introduction, that word "becoming" is especially important to us in Adult Discipleship. Therefore, our vision for small groups is one of gradual maturation in the Christian faith. Small group ministry, then, will not succeed if it keeps people where they are. We want to encourage people to *grow*, simply stated. Therefore, our desire is for groups to embark on a structured, two-year program, and then to move forward into deeper opportunities afterwards (more said below). This journey comes from a sense that groups that start and continue indefinitely without true growth miss the mark, and that beginning with an end goal in mind can be a blessing. We want to affirm the goodness of forming habits of community with the people in your group while also balancing out our call to keep growing and evolving.

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Here is the journey we envision:



## THE SMALL GROUP JOURNEY *(cont.)*

### STAGE 1

Your group, over the course of one year, completes the small group journal for Year One, *Communities of Blessing*. This journal has two major formational goals in mind: a commitment to learning how to serve your fellow small group members well, and the cultivation of a deep awareness of your personal story.

### STAGE 2

Your group, also over the course of one year, completes the small group journal for Year Two, *Communities of Hope*. This second journal, like the first, has two major formational goals in mind: developing intentional habits that nurture your relationship with God, and the sharing of your faith through mentorship.

### STAGE 3

Ultimately, our desire is that through your participation in a small group, you might come to respond to God's call on your life to disciple others. If our journey is one of "becoming" – of continued growth in God's love – that road will lead us towards discipling other people. Our prayer is that your time in a small group will equip you to say "yes" to that call. When you finish the two-year program, here are three pathways for your group:

🔑 You and/or other members of your small group might choose to share your faith through mentoring. There are many ways to mentor and disciple others at Resurrection. You can do so in missions, student ministry, and beyond. Our hope is that some members of your group might choose to be small group **leaders** for a new round of group launch. In doing so, they would be moving to a deeper level of Christian service and leadership.

🔑 A small number of people within your current small group might choose to continue meeting in an intentional manner for Christian discussion based on the practice of John Wesley. The Year 2 journal will train you how to do this and tailor the experience to the unique needs of your group. You could retain this practice as a group for as long as you'd like.

🔑 You do both of these things!

In short, we are inviting groups to a 2-year journey, and then to prayerfully consider how their journey might continue at the conclusion of those years through mentorship and/or smaller, focused meetings. John Wesley called this intentional form of group meeting the "band meeting." It would entail forming smaller groups within your small group to create opportunities for deeper authenticity and sharing over your life of faith. Adult Discipleship will equip you to meet in this fashion when you get to that point.

We believe this model keeps us accountable to our call to always grow and mature. As we form close bonds with our groups and the community around us, we hold in tension the gift of steady community on the one hand, and the opportunity to constantly seek what God has for us next on the other hand.





# 8 KEYS FOR LEADING YOUR SMALL GROUP

## #1 CATCH THE WORDS

**Bottom Line:** Meaningfully respond to every comment, even if brief.

Oftentimes as leaders we are tempted to keep the responses flowing. However, when one person speaks up and no one acknowledges that they spoke up, the whole group can feel like they will be ignored if they speak up, and conversation might be stifled as a result. Words are vulnerable. Think of someone's words that are spoken in the group like an egg that they hold out and then toss. When you as a leader respond, even if briefly, to the words they shared, you "catch" that egg. It makes them feel safe, and now the whole group trusts you to catch their words without letting them drop and splatter. When words are not "caught," the group might feel unsafe. In their minds, they usually feel like this: "If I toss out my words, maybe they won't be caught. It will hurt to see them splatter." You can help your group by catching their words.

SEE A LIVE EXAMPLE AT:  
[groups.cor.org/resources](https://groups.cor.org/resources)



**EXAMPLES:** Try to catch every comment!

*After someone talks, say...*

- ▶ "Thank you for sharing that."
- ▶ "I appreciate you speaking up."
- ▶ "That sounds difficult."
- ▶ "That's a really good observation."

## #2 REFLECT WHAT YOU HEAR

**Bottom Line:** An excellent response to someone's comment can be as simple as reflecting back what you just heard them say.

One of the best gifts you as a leader can give to someone in your group is the opportunity to help them see themselves. Have you ever seen a video recording of yourself? Or an audio recording? If so, you understand that there are all kinds of things about ourselves we don't notice because we rarely have the chance to see them. When we see good things in ourselves, it can make us feel self-confident, and it calls to attention the good work God is doing in our life. When we see growth areas, it may be challenging, but you might feel thankful that someone helped you notice it. Through your group facilitation, you can play a role in helping someone see themselves. We can call this "reflecting." Reflecting what someone just spoke is also helpful in that it "catches" their words and serves as an easy response. Don't know what to say after someone speaks? Reflect their words back! **Restate** what was said, and **validate** the emotion.

SEE A LIVE EXAMPLE AT:  
[groups.cor.org/resources](https://groups.cor.org/resources)



**EXAMPLES:** Think about how these responses might help someone see themselves...

- ▶ "It seems like you feel \_\_\_\_\_ about \_\_\_\_\_."
- ▶ "I can see why you feel \_\_\_\_\_ about \_\_\_\_\_."
- ▶ "So \_\_\_\_\_ happened yesterday? That sounds like it would be hard."
- ▶ "You did \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_? That is extremely kind of you!"
- ▶ "I can always tell from your responses how compassionate you are for others."
- ▶ "I can feel that you might be stressed even as you talk about that. Would you like to say more?"
- ▶ "Thanks for sharing that. I think I speak on behalf of the group when I say \_\_\_\_\_ is a spiritual gift of yours."
- ▶ "I sense that you are getting frustrated about \_\_\_\_\_. Would you like to connect about that after group?"

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### #3 BE DIRECTIVE AT FIRST...THEN CULTIVATE OWNERSHIP

**Bottom Line:** Groups are dependent on structure in their early stages. Be gently assertive at first in leading your group through the flow of your time together.

Healthy discussion in a group setting is dependent on an environment that feels safe, and to a degree, predictable (though some spontaneity is unavoidable). It is our human nature to feel stress when we are caught off guard. As a group gets started, a reliable structure can be valuable to the maturation of your group. Leaders can live into this healthy practice by being gently assertive to move the group through the planned material or activities. This can include nudging reserved people to speak, as well. If your group senses that there is no control, or that the conversation is aimlessly drifting, they might shut down. They might also shut down if they feel that you as the leader are establishing an environment in which only the most vocal can speak. Take an active role in managing this process at first – your group will thank you for it.

#### EXAMPLES:

- ▶ *"I love how rich this discussion is. In order to honor our time, though, I'm going to move us on to the next activity."*
- ▶ *"It seems like we are getting off course. Let me pull us back again to the topic of discussion so we can respect those who wish to discuss the material."*
- ▶ *"I haven't heard anyone from this side of the room speak up. Would any of you like to share?"*

**Bottom Line 2:** As your group matures, your role will be to foster shared ownership.

It is true that your group depends on your direction and structure in its beginning stages. But as time goes on and your group settles in, giving people space to live into their own growth is essential. This growth might not happen if leaders develop a culture in which they are the primary driver of conversation and activities. Stepping out of the way allows people to learn. People learn about *themselves* as they hear themselves speak and as group members affirm what is spoken. People learn about *each other* by listening to how God has worked in the lives of other group members. As you see this growth, you can turn over some responsibilities to your people.

#### EXAMPLES:

- ▶ *"I've noticed you have a gift for \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think would be a good idea for the social event next week?"*
- ▶ *"You all seem to be interested by this topic. Let's stay with this question for a while."*
- ▶ *"\_\_\_\_\_ is passionate about \_\_\_\_\_. She's going to share next week."*
- ▶ *"This event is happening soon. Maybe some of you could organize and find a way for us to attend as a group?"*

### #4 REDIRECT CHALLENGING COMMENTS

**Bottom Line:** Out of place comments will occur in small groups. Receive them gracefully, but confidently guide the conversation back to where it needs to be.

To redirect is to gracefully acknowledge an off-topic or insensitive comment yet pull the conversation back to the topic. You can also redirect if someone is talking too much. When you redirect, you first "catch" the comment but then affirm your commitment to holding the structure of the group time. **The key part of redirecting is validating the person in question before you redirect their comment.** Our goal is not to be rude, but to help the person see that others wish to participate in a meaningful way.

Redirection is *not* intended for comments that are just heavy or controversial while still being respectful. In fact, we *want* people to be vulnerable and real. Instead, it may be necessary in the manner of the following examples. (If persons consistently make out of place comments, please refer to the information on Page 10, "Dealing with Challenging Group Dynamics.")



## #4 REDIRECT CHALLENGING COMMENTS (cont.)

SEE A LIVE EXAMPLE AT:  
[groups.cor.org/resources](https://groups.cor.org/resources)



### EXAMPLE:

▶ LEADER: "What came to mind as you watched the video?"

MEMBER: "I just can't stand my neighbor. He's the worst and I hope bad things happen to him and people like him. No one in this group better be like my neighbor."

LEADER: "It sounds like it's really weighing on you – would you like to share more with me after the group? What do the rest of us think of the video?" [The issue is that this member's comment makes others feel unsafe.]

- ▶ "A leader asks how everyone is doing. One member names a struggle they are having – but he continually talks over people, avoids the topic of discussion, and generally tries to bring up his struggle over and over until it removes permission for others to speak, or for the leader to discuss the topic. The leader says, "Thank you for bringing this up. I'd like to honor everyone's time and discuss our intended material. Let's connect about this after group." [The issue here is not that someone names a struggle, even more than once – we want people to be able to do that so we can care for them! The issue is the frequency, intensity, and controlling nature of the comments.]
- ▶ "Someone is talking too much. The leader says, "\_\_\_\_\_, those are great insights. I'd like to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."

## Part TWO KEYS FOR LISTENING WELL

## #5 TRY NOT TO ASSUME YOU KNOW WHAT THEY'RE FEELING

**Bottom Line:** Avoid saying to your people, "I understand what you're going through." Usually, we do not truly understand what someone is going through. Instead, simply validate the feelings they name.

Trying to understand someone's feelings is challenging. What do you do if someone shares something really hard – like ongoing grief or depression? You could try to feel what they are feeling and affirm their emotions. This is called empathy. Or, you could try to express compassion on behalf of them. This is called sympathy. While empathy is the more powerful posture of connection in that it meets someone exactly where they are, it runs the risk of inauthenticity (when you might not actually understand what someone is feeling). Sympathy, on the other hand, is helpful in that it expresses compassion without inauthentically trying to understand them, but it runs the risk of condescension if you make the other person feel pitied rather than cared for ("I feel sorry for you"). **The best thing you can do when someone shares what they are going through is to validate the person's feelings.** Listen well, let them know that their feelings are valid, and to reiterate that their struggles are legitimate.

### HELPFUL EXAMPLES:

- ▶ "That sounds really hard. How could we support you?"
- ▶ "I'm so sorry to hear you are going through that."
- ▶ "It makes complete sense that you would feel that way."
- ▶ "I'm so glad that you feel proud of yourself! That is a big accomplishment."

### UNHELPFUL EXAMPLES:

- ▶ "I know exactly what you are going through."
- ▶ "I feel so sorry for you."
- ▶ "I've felt the same way, and I handled it by \_\_\_\_\_."

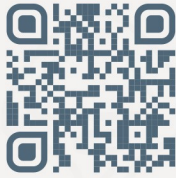
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## #6 SILENCE IS NOT THE ENEMY

**Bottom Line:** Many small group leaders try to fill silence, which removes permission for people to take time to think. Instead, learn to trust silence as a sign that their gears are turning.

This one isn't complicated, and all it takes is a mental shift. Silence in group discussion often makes leaders feel uncomfortable. This feeling is completely normal. You start to think, "Is this going well? Am I doing okay as a leader?" So you answer your own question or call on someone. But silence usually just means your people are thinking. If you establish a pattern in which people have time before speaking, everyone will feel more comfortable with silence. If you try to fill silence, it might have the reverse effect of causing people to think they must have a fully formed answer at their disposal in order to speak. If silence starts to last too long, then you can prompt them. But it's usually not as long as you think!

SEE A LIVE EXAMPLE AT:  
[groups.cor.org/resources](https://groups.cor.org/resources)



### EXAMPLE:

► After a moment of silence: "It's okay not to answer right away – take some time to think." When even that doesn't work: "Okay, that's alright. I'll give one more opportunity to hear from someone if you wish to speak, and then we can move on."

## #7 AVOID THE HABIT OF PROVIDING SOLUTIONS

**Bottom Line:** Growth occurs when someone is able to work through challenges. Provide answers or solutions only after you have first given someone an opportunity to grow.

We are curious by nature, always looking for answers. How should I live? Why do my relationships struggle? What do I do when I encounter trouble at work? As a leader, it feels good to be able to answer questions and provide solutions. While it may be helpful at times to provide answers, our first priority should be the growth of the people in the group. When we provide a solution to a problem, we may be taking away opportunities for group members to learn. (We also miss out on experiencing the mystery of God, who cannot be captured by simple answers.) At the end of the day, it is likely that the people in your group are there not just for answers, but for connection with a community of believers and an encounter with God. If someone seeks answers, though, first allow them the opportunity to grow. If they still need guidance and you are confident you have the right words for them, by all means, share them.

### EXAMPLES:

- "That's a great question. I'll be honest that I may not know the best answer."
- "That certainly is a complex problem you are facing. Maybe the first thing we can do before brainstorming is pray for you as a group."
- "That is an interesting point. Maybe you and I both could do some digging on that issue and discuss it when we meet next week."
- "Hmm. I know you'd like an answer here. But take some time to consider your question – what do you think?"

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### NOTES:



## #8 USING "I LANGUAGE" ABOUT GOD

**Bottom Line:** When your group members are able to talk about their relationships with God – rather than just learn information about God – you are in a prime spot for spiritual growth.

It is much easier to talk about God on an informational level than a personal level. There is a layer of security we feel when we can talk about what a passage of the Bible is saying about God, or what we think about a particular belief about God. Talking about information isn't as vulnerable. What's harder is to ask people to share about their relationship with God on a *personal* level. If you try to ask them to share in this way, you might find that people are suddenly uncomfortable! That's why it's so easy to focus on Bible studies, curriculum, or discussion questions that ask us to talk *about* God rather than our relationship *with* God.

Part of this dynamic has to do with the vulnerability of talking about our personal relationship with God. There is a necessary level of trust and safety that must be present for your group to feel confident to open up in this way. When we have not created a group culture that feels trusting, fun, and safe, it will be harder for the members to experience the growth that comes from talking about their relationships with God, nor should we force that kind of sharing.

But this kind of sharing is the goal. Spiritual growth in small groups occurs when our relationship with God is front and center. When your group has settled and developed a sense of trust, here's a trick to use to foster spiritual growth: I call it using "I language" about God. This refers to those times people in your group say things like, "I saw God in my life at (a particular place) this week," or "I think God has been doing \_\_\_\_\_ in my life over the last year," or even, "I'm having a hard time connecting with God right now." When they are speaking in this manner, it means they are successfully making connections between God and their personal lives.

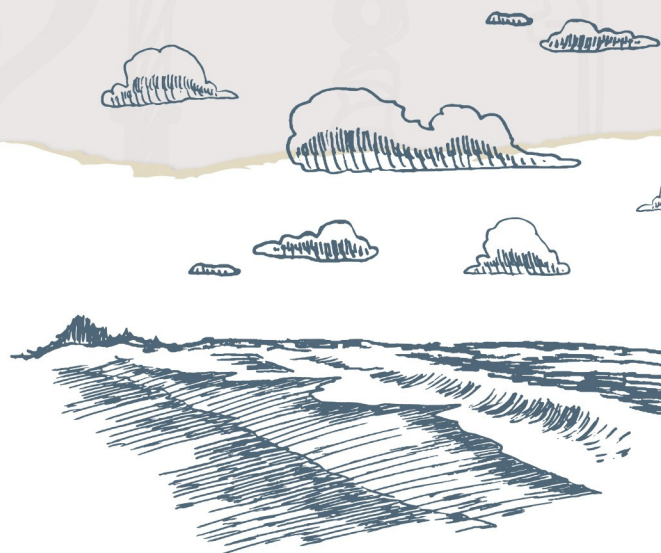
How does a group get to that level? First, if *you* are comfortable talking about your relationship with God with "I (or my) language," your group will be, too. You can model it.

### EXAMPLES:

- ▶ "This material reminds me of a time in my life where God was working in this way."
- ▶ "This speaks to how I experience God...it may look differently for you, but for me it looks like \_\_\_\_\_."
- ▶ "I've really seen God working in my life by \_\_\_\_\_."

Second, try to make it a goal in every session to ask a question that connects the material to your members' relationships with God. The Small Group Journals intentionally do this in every lesson, so you can rely on those discussion questions to accomplish this part. If you're not using the journal for your meeting, you can ask these questions as a supplement to your material:

- ▶ "What might this material say about your relationship with God or what God is doing in your life?"
- ▶ "And then, "How is your relationship with God this week? How do you want it to change or stay the same in light of what we've talked about?"





# Dealing with Challenging **GROUP DYNAMICS**

by Pastor Justin Schoolcraft  
and Bren Tally, LCMFT

**THE GOAL FOR ANY SMALL GROUP** is growth that leads to a deeper relationship with God. What we recognize in small groups ministry is that conversation with believers is vital to that process. In order for that kind of conversation to occur, though, the group must feel like a safe space.

Creating safe space is hard work, especially if you have difficult personalities at play. This document is to help small group leaders respond to challenges in a group when they arise. Specifically, we want leaders to have a sense for what to do in the event that a member of a group is sharing or acting inappropriately. By “inappropriately,” we do *not* mean “controversial” in their opinions or “emotional.” We specifically mean those rare occasions in which someone dominates a group to the detriment of others, or repeatedly shares overtly offensive or out-of-context remarks that make conversation unmanageable. When that happens, what do you do? The temptation might be to ostracize that member, but that’s not what we want to happen! **Our hope is to model grace and accountability that reflects the love of Christ** when dynamics like this arise.

Here’s a possible roadmap:

- ① Make sure that everyone has agreed to common standards. There is a list of standards in the small group journals, but you can go to [groups.cor.org](http://groups.cor.org) for a sample member agreement if you aren’t using those. In that agreement is a clear statement indicating that the leader will initiate a conversation if dialogue arises that contradicts the standard of respect.
- ② Redirect in the moment, as per the key mentioned above, if you have a member who is consistently saying things that are off-topic or off-base. You can also use this tool if someone is sharing too frequently without letting others speak. Redirection is not a tool to shut people down, but to keep everyone on topic. When comments like this occur, you should respond to the person but confidently redirect the conversation back on track. If comments are so intense or inappropriate that it is significantly damaging your group time, you should absolutely state out loud during group time that such comments are not reflective of group standards, and that you will need to talk with the individual in question after the fact.
- ③ Talk to the group member in question in private if their comments consistently prevent the group from communicating effectively. Here are some possible things you could say to that person. There are lots of examples so that you can choose the one that feels right for the given situation.

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## DEALING WITH CHALLENGING GROUP DYNAMICS *(cont.)*

### EXAMPLES:

- ▶ *"Hey, I notice you feel really comfortable sharing thoughts and personal experiences in our group. Would you mind helping me model and encourage others to feel comfortable speaking out like you?"*
- ▶ *"If I say, 'can I interrupt you' - let's have it serve as a sign between us that I need your help opening up space for someone who hasn't spoken yet."*
- ▶ *"Let's work together to make the group feel safe for those who aren't as comfortable as you."*
- ▶ *"It seems like you want the group to know \_\_\_\_\_ (about your battle with an illness? About your hard relationship with the church/or with another person?) As a newer small group, though, it may be a subject that takes some work before they feel comfortable responding well."*
- ▶ *"This isn't your intention when you share \_\_\_\_\_, but group members may shut down and not feel like their story matters, OR you may start to feel like the group has stopped listening to you."*
- ▶ *"I know \_\_\_\_\_ is an important part of your story. Can we meet outside of group so I can hear more?"*
- ▶ *"Can I connect you with a care and connections pastor to help process things more?"*
- ▶ *"Can I connect you with a counselor (through our counseling referral ministry) so you can continue to process your story in a meaningful way with someone who is trained to be a really, good listener?"*

④ If the problem persists, remind the person of the conversation you had with them and let them know that the expectations in the group agreement stand.

⑤ If the problem still persists, refer to Pastor Justin for a plan on how best to care for the individual and your group, which will draw upon the many supportive resources our church has to offer, including our excellent counseling ministry if it is needed.

**The goal here is twofold: maintaining a healthy and fun group for everyone, and encouraging real, healthy growth for persons who are struggling to participate well.**

Our goal is not to ostracize anyone, but to truly *care* for them in the way Jesus would have us. If we give the person the silent treatment or never confront the issue, we will not be truly helping them grow, and the whole group will feel uncomfortable. We want to emphasize one final time that this process is not intended for those who are sharing unique perspectives, heavy stories, or deep emotion. Those are signs of a safe space and are not to be deterred, even if you have different perspectives. This is instead when behavior emerges that makes the goal of the small group – conversation promoting spiritual growth – unattainable due to the impact that it creates.

Pastor Justin Schoolcraft  
[justin.schoolcraft@cor.org](mailto:justin.schoolcraft@cor.org)



