



HARMONY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

CONNECTION GROUP SYSTEM TRAINING MANUAL

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Pre-Requisite: God qualifies the called not calls the qualified

We firmly believe that God qualifies the called, not calls the qualified.

This means, in order to be a Connection Group leader, you don't have to have it all together.

With that being said there still are a few basic requirements to lead in this capacity. We want to do our best to communicate about this upfront before you go any further in your Leadership Training.

Connection Group Leaders:

Being a Connection Group Leader is one of the greatest gifts anyone can give or receive. It allows you to open a world of opportunities to those you lead and can make an eternal impact through the relationships you build. Because being a leader is such an important position to hold, we do have some basic requirements we look for in a leader at our church – as James 3:1 says, “teachers will be judged more harshly” so we do our best on the front end to protect those who we put in this position.

4 Connection Group Leader Basic Requirements*

- Our Connection Group Leaders must be **living lives worthy of replicating**
 - Not addicted to alcohol or drugs
 - Not using coarse language
 - Not sexually engaging with someone other than their spouse (this includes living together outside of marriage)
- Our Connection Group Leaders must be a baptized follower of Christ and actively **growing closer to Jesus**
- Our Connection Group Leaders must be **relationally intelligent** (we care about others and treat them with kindness)
- Our Connection Group Leaders must be **teachable** themselves (humility is the hallmark of a great leader. We are looking for individuals who are teachable and willing to realize that everyone has something they can teach others)

*Connection Group Leaders are approved at the discretion of ministry staff and elder.

So, what if I'm not sure I match up to these qualifications?

We get it. Some of us have come out of challenging circumstances and still have some old muscle memory left in us from our previous way of life – there was a time when I would have been disqualified from leading a Connection Group due to some lifestyle choices I was making. While we believe that those we lead are worthy of our best, we also don't believe that you should be totally disqualified from serving just because you don't have it all together. There are a lot of areas to serve in our church that are not near as involved as being a Connection Group Leader. We would love to have you start serving as a greeter, or helping with maintenance around the building, you could serve on our security team, or help follow up with new people. There are a lot of ways to get

involved and get going, the best way is to simply **contact** someone from our team and let them know you are interested in finding a place to serve.

LESSON 1. Groups Short Description:

Groups are designed to help people go from just attending church to getting engaged in friendships that can lead to discipleship. Every group we have studies the same sermon-based material to help us take our discipleship further into the week. It's our hope that your Connection Group will soon become some of your best friends in the world and that relationships will form that will forever impact your life.

Why Connection Groups?

This is simple: because we need each other. Christianity was NEVER meant to be lived in a vacuum

Acts 2:42-47

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The early disciples were committed to meeting together in small groups in homes.

- Small groups are where community happens best in a church
- Small groups are where care happens best in a church
- Small groups are where Discipleship happens best in a church

Small groups are where the church can really be the church!

LESSON 2. Connection Group Values:

The values of the small groups help us determine what we do and how we do it

We build trust

- “What’s said here stays here”
- “We build each other up, not tear each other down”

We build friendship

- “We care about each other. We hurt together, we celebrate together.”
- “We are here for each other – can’t build friendships if we aren’t around”

We build each other’s faith

- “We help each other grow in our walk with Jesus”
- “We commit to learning, growing, and challenging one another”

These values determine the way we interact with one another. A great example of how these values influence the way we interact is when someone from our group is sick or in the hospital. In a normal church, if someone is sick or in the hospital that person will only get visited or any level of care from the church if they or someone else lets the church know. Because in our small groups model we build friendships, we are involved in each other's lives. If we notice that someone from the group is sick, we offer to watch their kids or to take them meals. If they are in the hospital, we visit them. The values change the way we interact with each other in our groups.

This is why, for most people, their small group becomes one of their favorite parts of their church experience, because the group has become a virtual family of sorts.

LESSON 3. Connection Group Rhythm:

We are intentional with our groups about honoring the rhythms of the year. This means that we have both time when we are meeting and times when we are taking a break from meeting. Below are the following Seasons of meeting:

Fall: September-Early December.

(Groups intentionally end early in December with a Christmas Party because December becomes increasingly busy as it goes by)

Winter: January-Early May.

(May is a busy month with finishing up school, planning vacations, graduation, etc. We intentionally try and end in May before it gets too crazy)

Summer: June-August

(Groups will meet on a monthly basis for BBQ's and get-togethers)

It can be tempting to not take breaks, but ministry is best done with periods of activity and non-activity. It is the non-activity that helps make the times together feel special. Even though you might be tempted to not break, or your group might want to violate the principle of rhythm, please lead them to take the break and enjoy it.

LESSON 4. Connection Group Structure:

Typical Schedule:

- 20 min. Snacks and Hang out (this is where we build friendships with one another)
- 40-60 min. Discussion (one of the group members leads a devotional thought and questions for the group to discuss and look at things from a Godly perspective)
- 10 min. Prayer Time (take time to discuss prayer needs and pray)

LESSON 5. Positions for Connection Groups:

It can be tempting as the facilitator to keep most or all of these positions to yourself, but that is a mistake. Besides encouraging others to take leadership and ownership of the group, these positions also ensure that there's at minimum 5 individuals who are going to show up for your group and possibly upwards of 10.

DO NOT SKIP HAVING PEOPLE TO TAKE ON THESE POSITIONS.

1. Facilitator

- Trained individual. Maintains a coaching relationship with planting small group
- Keeps group focused and moving in the right direction

2. Host

- Make your house available for group meetings
- Provide a hospitable environment for the group

3. Communication Coordinator

- Send out reminders to the whole group about the upcoming meeting
- Let people know about anything urgent for the group to know (prayer requests, etc.)

4. Snack Coordinator

- Create a schedule and coordinate who will bring snacks for each meeting
- 2 days before, remind that week's snack person

5. Devotions Coordinator

- Send out encouraging devotional material weekly to the group
- Helps encourage others to share devotional material as well

LESSON 6. Guidelines for Facilitating a Connection Group

- **Relationships are the highway that faith travels on.** There can be a temptation to try and make every single moment "spiritual" in a Connection Group. We need to understand that having fun and building relationships with one another is just as spiritual as deep bible study because it develops the trust by

which your deep insights will be valued. The old adage they don't care how much you know until they know you care is very true.

- **Ask questions don't answer them.** One of the most tempting and damaging things to do when facilitating a group is to ask and answer all your questions. People don't typically answer questions right away because they are thinking up the answer. Learn to live and be ok with silence. If they don't get an answer, try rephrasing or explaining the question better.
- **Never alone with members of the opposite sex.** In our society, there is too much danger and potential for allegations of inappropriate activity. We are wise as serpents and innocent as doves – protect your integrity and never ever be alone with a member of the opposite sex that isn't your spouse.
- **Be an agent of unity.** Groups can easily turn from producing good fruit to producing gossip and grudges. Be quick to spot potential comments and threads of disunity and redirect the group by helping them choose to speak to the person that the problem exists with and reminding them that one of the last things Jesus prayed for was the unity of believers.
- **Everyone in a circle.** Always sit in a circle with your group, do not allow anyone to be inside or outside of the circle if possible. This will create unnecessary psychological barriers to your participants. Circles create attention and focus, it allows everyone to see each other's faces and engage with the discussion as a whole. That's why circles are better than rows.
- **Everyone in a chair.** Chairs provide structure and boundaries and allow people to be comfortable. Being in a chair will make them better listeners. If possible have everyone in a chair.
- **Guide the conversation.** Sometimes small group discussions are magical – the heavens open, God moves and people really share. Other times it feels like pulling teeth. Here are some suggestions on how to handle various types of problems you encounter in a group:
 - **The talker.** Occasionally there is an individual who does all the talking and dominates the group. This is when you have to step up and be a leader and direct the conversation, try saying things like, "Thanks Joan, let's hear what some of the rest of you are thinking, Stan, how about you." If the talker doesn't get the hint, pull them aside afterward and tell them how much you appreciate their input and how you can tell they are a leader. Tell them great leaders don't tell everyone what to do, they help lead them to the desired outcome. Ask them to help you in the group by allowing others to answer questions too.
 - **The needy person.** Some people are needy, they want all the attention placed on them. They will accomplish this by manipulating people's emotions in the group, dominating conversations, and trying to keep their attention focused on them. When this begins to happen in your group, you need to be quick to manage it – this individual garnering all the attention is taking it from the rest of the group who will quickly become disinterested in the group. When a needy person brings up issues that are taking up the entire group discussion, try using this technique, "Bill, it sounds like you are going through some crazy stuff right now, how about you and I talk about

this after group tonight?”. What you have done is not minimized Bill’s issue, but you have also said to the rest of the group, I want to hear from you too.

- **The silent treatment.** There are several potential reasons groups will give you the silent treatment. About 70% of the time the issue is that you as the leader are doing too much talking. Leaders tend to be threatened by silence – it makes us insecure. So our answer to silence is to fill the silence with us talking. The problem is your participants are silent after you ask them a question because they are thinking. Imagine if I asked you to describe the most exciting thing you’ve ever done. Likely you would need to process through decades of events to find one singular event to describe. That could even take minutes for you to come to a conclusion. The answer to this issue is for you as a leader to embrace silence. I will even tell my group members that I am fine with the silence and I will wait until they have an answer. This forces the group to realize they can’t get away with not talking. There are a few issues though that will make up the other 30% of the time. One of these issues is when a member of the group or even members are going through some incredibly emotionally difficult times. As a leader, you need to be adept enough to read how your group is doing and if you need to adjust to talk about something that is more pressing on the group’s mind than what was prepared, do so. Lead them. Some people are just extreme introverts. Do not push these people to talk. Occasionally throw them a bone so they know you really want them to participate and you want to hear what they have to say. But they may very well be terrified to speak around other people and forcing them to do so does not benefit them spiritually, it may actually drive a wedge between you and them.
- **The gatekeeper.** Some people are not interested in what you have to say and they will try and move the conversation and the group at a pace that is different than what you as the leader know it needs to go. This is where you as a leader need to step up and take charge. You can do this in several ways. The best way is to try and personalize the questions and bring the group member into the discussion, “John, how about you, is there a way you’ve seen this play out in your own family?” Another way to grab their attention is to shock them by taking the reverse stance to the popular answer to the question, “Nick, do you seriously believe that Jesus’ death on the cross 2,000 years ago could make any difference in my life today?”. This type of question disrupts Nick’s train of thought and puts him in a disequilibrium that makes him have to think about the answer and engage with the conversation. If you seem to not be able to draw Nick into the conversation, pull him aside after the group and say, “Nick, you seemed super distracted during our group tonight, is something going on?” You may find that Nick’s just got his second notice at work that he’s on the chopping block and he really just wants to get home and relax.
- **The Jokester.** This person is almost always trying to deflect the serious discussion and keep things from getting too personal. There is almost always a deeper issue inside of the jokester and they have learned to use

humor as a coping skill. This person needs love and care and needs to learn that this is a safe place to share what is inside of them. You will not be able to force them beyond this but can draw them out of just being a joker. Try pulling them aside before or after group and share with them something like this, “Karl, you are one of the funniest people I know! You make me laugh a lot, I just wanted to ask if you would help me out because sometimes in the group you are making jokes when we are trying to talk about serious things. I know sometimes it might not be stuff that pertains to you, but there are a lot of us who do need to talk about this stuff. Would you mind helping me out and not making jokes when it’s serious? If you forget, I might kind of give you a little look to remind you if that’s ok?” See how we are honoring the relationship, valuing the individual, but still maintaining the rule of order?

- **The Smokescreen.** There are people who will throw up a smokescreen – usually in the form of an argument – to get you off-topic. You will know this happened because you will end up not doing anything you meant to do for the time you had allotted. Dealing with a smokescreen is super easy, just say something like this, “Mark, that’s really interesting, let’s talk about that after group tonight...” and then return the discussion back to what you were talking about.
- **The Thief.** This person is trying to steal the discussion from you and take it in a different direction. They are usually not trying to be malicious, they just have a serious question that’s on their mind and they want an answer. If the question can be answered relatively quickly, then go ahead and answer it and get back to what you had prepared for the night. If the topic is going to require more than a few minutes, then again redirect them to meet after group just like you would with a smokescreen and tell them you would love to discuss it.
- **The Clique.** This can be a terrible situation when a clique forms within your group. It’s Terrible specifically for the people who are on the outside of the clique. The problem for the leader is you will often be inside the clique so it’s harder to recognize it forming. Use your influence to help everyone feel welcome. Keep an eye open for group members that are quieter or seem to stay on the outside (physically they will not be standing in the circles or trying to sit outside the circle). Intentionally try to draw them into discussions and make sure they are a part of the circle. Don’t force people to talk, but make sure they know they are important to you and the group.

Here is the bottom line with your group. **If you do not manage these situations, they will always manage to kill your group.** Because each of those issues left unmanaged manages to take the direction and attention of your group off of you leading with each member participating and instead focuses most of the energy on the desires of one individual or a smaller group. This inevitably causes frustration in the rest of your group members and eventually will lead to disinterest and disengagement.

As hard as it is to confront these situations head-on, the result of not doing so is much more devastating. It is true that you may end up losing the person who is causing the issues in the group – but at least you tried to help them mature and grow as a person. If you do not address the issues, you are choosing to lose the rest of the group through your inaction.

LESSON 7. Connection Group Question Development Strategy:

Developing good group questions is harder than it sounds at first glance. There actually is such a thing as a bad question when talking about leading other people into a group discussion. Here are two examples on the same topic, one is a great question and the other falls flat:

What is the most challenging thing about growing up with parents who are divorced?

or

Is it hard having divorced parents?

Can you spot the differences in those two questions? The initial question does a few things that the other doesn't. First, it makes the group member a theorist. Theorists take specific ideas and create general theories about them. This question takes the specific idea of divorce and gives the group member a specific way of considering divorce — challenges — and then asks them to create a theory about what is challenging about it. Even a group member who has not been through divorce can theorize about the challenges of living in a divorced situation. These questions also open up a world of possible answers and opportunities for the leader to dig deeper into issues that come out. This is a discussion starter. The second question will be answered within 3 seconds and group will be looking at you ready for the next question. Why is that? Because it was a bad question. First off it assumes that the group member has experienced having divorced parents, this may or may not be true. The question was narrow in the wrong area – where the first questions narrowed down the discussion to the concept of challenges (instead of benefits, or long term consequences, or how to help someone else through the issue —there are a million ways to narrow down the concept), the second question narrowed it down to personal experience, you have had divorced parents – 50% of the people may have immediately disqualified themselves from the discussion due to the simple wording of this question. The second issue is that the question is not open-ended, the question is simply a yes or no question. The third issue with this question is that it is asking something that we could likely assume about anyone who have gone through a divorce. Of course, it's hard, why are we asking the "is it" question instead of asking the "what" question, "what makes it hard."

It takes time to become good at asking the right kind of questions, but hopefully, these guidelines give you something you can bounce your questions off of in order to

determine if you are creating the kind of questions that will most impact group member's lives.

LESSON 8. Let's talk about flow:

The Principle of Flow: All of life has a flow to it, a specific order that gives context and meaning to the other parts. Imagine someone who chooses to exercise and does not honor the principle of Flow. The person starts by taking a shower, then they begin bench pressing, after bench pressing, they choose to run on the treadmill for 15 min., then go back to the weight benches, then the stair climber, then eat lunch, on the treadmill again, and back to the benches. The person leaves the gym, feeling sick to their stomach, sweaty and gross, and feeling a little disoriented about their workout. All because they did not honor the flow of exercise — start with a cardio warm-up, work weights, shower, eat, feel refreshed. It's that simple, every time.

There is a particular flow to GREAT small group questions. We like to think of it using the analogy of spray painting plastic. If plastic is not prepared properly, the surface scratched up prior to application of the paint, then nothing you put on it will stick. In small group questions, we try to accomplish the following:

- **Scratch the surface:** Fun questions that build a history with the group (building history is when we allow people to tell stories about their lives, it helps build a common history among the group). The questions specifically are geared towards scratching up the surface of an idea that the people in your group hold within themselves that may or may not be true – we are trying to create a sense of disequilibrium. In the previous set of questions about divorce, we are using emotions to bring up that disequilibrium.
- **Paint the surface:** Most people like to get to this part too quickly, they just want to teach a concept. But without the proper surface preparation, all of the teaching will be for not. Painting the surface is important though. This is where we bring up the scriptures, where we point to God's character, where we engage the group members' thoughtfulness with the concepts we are trying to get across.
- **Finishing Touches:** Very few people actually think about putting on the finishing touches. Doing the things that bring the entire project together. The finishing touches in the small group setting are helping people think through practical ways to actually apply the information and concepts they have just been learning.

EXTRA'S:

How to write great questions:

1. **Create theorists:** Take a specific concept and invite people to give theories about the idea.

Example: Why do you think people find it so hard to forgive themselves?

Doing it Wrong: Do people find it hard to forgive themselves?

2. **Invite autopsies:** Invite people to autopsy (take apart and evaluate why something happens) an idea, concept, or experience.
Example: What makes it so hard for us to forgive others?
Doing it Wrong: Do you think it's hard to forgive others?

3. **Be specific but not complex:** Go the extra mile to explain what you are asking. Often times there is a concept in your head you are wanting to get at, but the group members have no idea what the concept was because you were not specific enough. Don't confuse specific with complex - simplicity is always a win, but it needs to be clear and specific.
Example: What was the most hurtful thing you have had happen to you in your life?
Doing it Wrong: When have you had that happen to you?

4. **Don't take the turns too fast:** As you are moving between scratching the surface, painting the surface, and doing the finishing touches, be sure to not take the turns too fast. Meaning, don't go from one concept to the next without having some connecting ideas between. When you go too fast through those turns you will hear people asking the question, "what was the question again?" You have disrupted the flow and they are trying to figure out where what was just asked fits into the current groupings of questions.
Example: We were just talking about forgiveness, part of being able to forgive is having experienced forgiveness for ourselves - how has God's forgiveness influenced your ability to forgive?
Doing it Wrong: How has God's forgiveness influenced your ability to forgive?

Evaluating your questions:

There are definitely other things to think about as you write good questions, but the key is to begin to understand that writing questions is both an art and a science. As you lead questions you have written with your group, make notes of the following:

1. Were there questions you had to rephrase for them to understand? What was unclear about them?
2. Did other leaders ask for clarity on specific questions? What was unclear, what could have been done better?
3. Did any questions shut down conversations rather than opening them up? Why do you think the questions did not create conversation?

Pro Tip:

Give leader insights into questions that you are trying to get to a specific answer. i.e. **"How's does Jesus' death on the cross 2,000 years ago have any impact on your life today?"** (*Leader Insight: this is a tough question to process, give them plenty of time. Ultimately, we are looking to point them to the fact that Jesus died once for all. His death covered time and space and can change every aspect of their life, even today. This might be a great opportunity to share the gospel - be looking for it.*)

Considerations:

Keep the calendar in mind

At the beginning of each semester you need to print up a calendar schedule to give to your group so they can keep track of when your group meets.

Childcare:

If your group has children you will want to consider how to best handle it for your group. Here are some successful strategies some groups have employed:

5. **Let them watch themselves:** If your group has older kids, as long as you have the right host house, you can just let them hang out and take care of themselves.
6. **Adults take turns watching the kids:** Each adult signs up to take a night to watch the kids while the other adults do their discussion time.
7. **The group hires a babysitter:** the group chips in each night to help pay for a babysitter. If you do this method, it's best to ask every member to help offset the cost as a part of their care for the members that do have kids.
8. **Have an older sibling watch the kids:** If you have an older sibling of some of the children that you trust to watch the kids, you can ask them to help by doing this. Please be sensitive to parents who may not be comfortable with this set up. If you pick up that someone isn't comfortable with it, be quick to assess and come up with a solution that they are comfortable with.

What's the best night?

Being flexible with the night your group meets on is important to show one another that you genuinely are caring friends. Be sensitive to life changes in your members and make sure that your group is able to still meet their needs by being on the night that the most group members can meet on.