

THE

MINISTRY

MATTERS

SERIES

DAVE EARLEY

THE

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*Practices*  
*of THE*

*HEALTHY*

*Life*

*Group*

*Dave Earley*

# **FIVE PRACTICES OF THE HEALTHY LIFE GROUP**

**By Dave Earley**

# CHAPTER 1

## Welcome: Maintaining Community

Once a group has gelled and the members love each other, the job of building and maintaining community is not finished. It has only just begun. The “one another” commands of the New Testament show us how community is maintained. In the last chapter, I explored five key passages. Furthermore, in this chapter, I’ll continue by showing you *how* the “one another” commands can be practically implemented.

### Make the Effort to Resolve Conflict

*(Romans 12:16)*

During the first few months of getting to know one another, conflicts may arise. Yet the potential for conflict is always present. No two people are alike. Therefore, it is just a matter of time until there is a rift between members. To try to deny or avoid variance is to kill true community. To resolve it *builds* community. When conflict comes — and it will come — the healthy group will work to resolve it and live in harmony. Here are a few basics to move you through conflict.

First, pray for discernment. Ask yourself, “Is there really a conflict or am I just being overly sensitive?” Many choose to take offense where the person in question simply chose the wrong words or could have phrased what they said in a better way. One must always attempt to discern the intent of the other person before assuming he or she meant harm with what was done or said.

Second, determine to own your part of the problem. Many conflicts are two-sided and the action of the other person is actually a *reaction* to something you may have done or said.

Third, determine the best time to talk privately with the person, which may be right away. Or, you may need to wait until you are calm and have collected your thoughts. But don’t wait too long. In either case, begin by letting them know that this might not be a comfortable conversation, but it is an important one.

If you have been the primary source of offense, I recommend that you make your approach using some form of these four simple phrases for resolving conflict. I am not sure where I first heard them, but I have used them frequently with great success. They are: “I was wrong”; “I am sorry”; “Please forgive me”; and “I love you.”

If the other person is the primary source of offense, you need to begin by affirming the value of your relationship by communicating that the reason you want to resolve this conflict is because you care about your relationship. Then share what you have observed

in terms of what was seen, heard and felt. Don't make accusations. Ask the person how he or she perceived the situation. Then try to gain a mutual understanding.

## **Bear with Each Other and Forgive One Another**

*(Ephesians 4:32)*

Community means "being family." This is expressed by loving all the people all the time, no matter what they are going through, regardless if they are having a bad day or are enduring a challenging set of circumstances. Community is deepened as you go with them through those times and continue to bear with them and, when necessary, forgive them.

## **Submit to One Another**

*(Ephesians 5:21)*

When it comes to preferences, arguments are not worth winning. Don't try to win every argument or always be right. In the big scheme of life, it probably won't make any difference. Community grows when you are willing to submit to one another and "agree to disagree" on preferential issues.

## **Refuse to Slander Someone in or Outside the Group**

*(James 4:11)*

Nothing will shut down community more quickly than slander. Most of us could tell horror stories of group life that was short-circuited by slander or gossip. It is wise to remind people every week that your small group is a safe place to share deep feelings. "What is said here stays here" is a good phrase that says it all. Once group members know that this is a true statement, sharing will deepen and community will grow.

## **Take Turns Showing Hospitality to One Another**

*(1 Peter 4:9)*

Don't let hospitality be the job of just one person or couple. The enemy is quick to move in and create hard feelings when the load of hospitality is not recognized, appreciated and shared. For this reason, many wise groups rotate the responsibility of bringing snacks and opening their homes for group meetings.

## **Clothe Yourself in a Servant's Apron of Humility**

*(1 Peter 5:5)*

There is no such thing as a community of one. Often, gifted teachers build groups on their awesome teaching, but the community life of the group suffers because the group revolves around the teacher. Or, there are those folks who think of the group as their personal counseling session and repeatedly monopolize the sharing time with lengthy stories of their never-ending problems. A good guideline for any group is "everyone participates, no one dominates."

## **Sin Dulls Light and Destroys Fellowship**

*(1 John 1:7)*

The deception and masks created by sin are a real community killer. True community is built through honest confession to one another and prayer for one another. Don't expect your small group members to confess their deepest sins in the meetings. The confession of sin is typically done one-on-one with another member of the group outside the meeting. This is why helping each person in your group form an accountable relationship with another one or two people of the same sex in the group is so important.

## **Motivate One Another**

*(Hebrews 10:24)*

Encourage each other to do the right things in life and ministry. God-hungry people bond with those who lovingly challenge them to get out of their comfort zones and go deeper, higher and further for God. Some of this can be done in meetings, but once again, the one-on-one relationship that motivates by loving encouragement and servanthood is the most powerful.

### **Action Points:**

1. Make a group list of the "one another's" that you would like to work on.
2. For the next few weeks in your group, talk about how you can apply these "one another" commands found in the gospels or throughout the New Testament.
3. Be specific with the application, and challenge the group to actually do what they're discussing and report back to the group with the results.

# CHAPTER 2

## Worship: Never Neglect the Power of Exalting God

**F**or several years, we led a large group of high school students in our house. Most of them were non-churched. It was always amazing how wonderfully they behaved. They often came in rowdy and loud. Yet, our time of worship never failed to quiet them down and prepare them for the Word. Only heaven knows how many were saved and eternally changed because of their initial encounters with God through worship.

One of the greatest, yet simple, reasons groups fail to reach their potential is that they neglect the power of worship. Never neglect the life-changing power of the presence of God available through worship. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Let's begin with the basic question: why worship?

### **Worship Is a Moral Obligation and a Natural Response to the Absolute Worth of God**

In other words, we worship God because he is *worth it*. God is great and greater than anyone or anything we can imagine. God has done great things for us. We should constantly remind ourselves of this by worshipping him.

### **Worship Completes Us**

In Isaiah 43:21, God refers to us as His people He formed for Himself *“that they may proclaim my praise.”* God created us to be proclaimers of His praise, to be worshippers. Until we become worshippers, we are not fulfilling our purpose for existence. When we fail to fulfill this purpose, we will fail to be fulfilled.

### **Worship Is Transforming**

Second Corinthians 3:18 says, *“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord.”* The word Christian means “little Christ.” The goal of the Christian is to become more like Christ. Becoming like Christ is a process that takes time. We all know that we tend to become like the people with whom we associate. Worship is high-level hanging around with Jesus. Therefore, it is life changing.

## **Worship Puts Life Back into Perspective**

Psalms 73 is the journal entry of Asaph renewing his perspective on the faithful life. He is struggling with the seeming prosperity of the wicked. How can they be wicked and prosper? Then he writes:

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood...God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever...But as for me, it is good to be near God. (Psalms 73:16–17, 26, 28)

What happened in the sanctuary that changed his perspective and encouraged his heart? Worship is what happened in the sanctuary. Asaph focused on God.

## **Worship Intensifies the Presence and Therefore, the Activity of God**

Psalms 22:3 can be understood as teaching that God's address is praise, "*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.*" I have found that God often manifests His presence in proportion to our expressed recognition of our need and love for Him. Jesus promised in Matthew 18:20, "*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*"

Now that we know why we should worship, the next logical question would be how to worship effectively. In a nutshell, worship is a verb. Worship is not something done to us, or for us, but by us. More than a feeling, worship is a choice or an action. Worship is something we must do. You can use music and sing, but you don't have to have music to worship.

Here are some activities to increase the engagement in worship in your group:

- k Being silent in awe (Isaiah 6)
- k Kneeling or lying facedown in absolute surrender (Revelation 4)
- k Confessing sin (2 Samuel 12; Psalms 51)
- k Shouting in thanksgiving (Psalms 42:4; 66:1–2; 71:23; 98:4; 100:1)
- k Trembling in reverence (Revelation 5:8)
- k Resolving to obey (Genesis 22)
- k Praising in the midst of difficulties (Job 1)
- k Giving God offerings out of gratitude (2 Samuel 24, 1 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 5–6)
- k Yielding your will (Jonah 2)
- k Dancing (2 Samuel 6; Psalms 149:3)
- k Singing for joy (Exodus 15; Psalms 21:13; 63:5; 71:22)
- k Playing musical instruments (Psalms 43:4; 71:22; 98:4–6)
- k Clapping your hands (Psalms 47:1)
- k Lifting your hands (Psalms 63:4; 134:2)

You can truly worship in non-musical ways. The goal is to actively worship God regularly in every small group gathering.

## **Action Points:**

1. A study of the Bible reveals over a dozen responses involved in worshipping God. Discuss these worship options as a group.
2. Pick a few of the worship activities listed above and implement them into your next meeting's worship time.<sup>48</sup>

# CHAPTER 3

## **W**ord: Bible Study, Discussion and Application Basics

**G**od's Word is one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal in the disciple-making process. Not only that but it is also the best-selling, most read, studied and memorized book in the world, as well as the most published book in the world, currently available in fifteen hundred languages. The Bible is also the world's most quoted, despised and discussed book. History reveals that it is the most influential book ever written and the most unstoppable, indestructible book ever written. It has inspired more songs, poems and other books than any other. Archaeology shows that the Bible is the most reliable ancient text known to humanity. Fulfilled prophecy makes it the most unique book on the planet. Careful reading shows it to be the most honest, accurate and interesting religious book ever penned. Because it is God's Word, the Bible is by far the most important book imaginable.

The point of the Bible and the reward for reading it is more than just to know interesting facts about what one finds within it. Rather, we read the Bible to know God and His plan for our lives. It is written so you and I can become transformed or changed into His image. God's Word is also there for us so we can be better equipped to make a difference in the world.

### **Bible Study Basics**

In studying a passage of the Bible there are three basic questions we must always ask.

#### **1. What Does This Passage Say?**

This is the act of *Observation*. Read the passage through while asking, "What does this passage seem to be saying? What is the author saying? Who wrote this passage? To whom was he writing? Why was he writing?"

#### **2. What Does This Passage Mean?**

This is the act of *Interpretation*. Take each passage in chunks of phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. As you look at it, answer the question: "What did the author intend for this to mean?" Try to paraphrase it into your own words.

### **3. How Can We Apply This Passage to Our Lives?**

This is the act of *Application*. Interpretation without application leads to spiritual abortion, but interpretation with application leads to transformation. Give an opportunity for every member of the group to finish this sentence: "Based on what this says, I should...." Responses may be in terms of a sin to confess, a promise to claim, an example to follow, an encouragement to accept, or a command to keep.

## **Bible Discussion Basics**

Good leaders always help the members of their group discover biblical truths for themselves. Therefore, they lead a discussion rather than preach a sermon. There are four major steps to aid this process:

### **1. Introducing the Discussion**

Learn to ask a question or questions that will lead the group members into the scripture or the topic of study and "break the ice" between members. For example, during a discussion on the Ten Commandments you could ask:

- Who laid down the law in your family?
- Why do parents make rules?
- Which rule did you like the least?
- Which family member tried to get around the rules? How?
- What were the consequences of breaking the rules?

### **2. Guiding the Discussion**

The point of these questions is to dig deeper into the passage. Some examples would be:

- What did you feel as you read these words?
- Why do you think God put this passage in the Bible?
- Who will paraphrase this passage in their own words?
- Who else would like to comment on that?

During this time, helping the group get back on track may be required. If your group starts "chasing rabbits," say something like, "That's very interesting, but we're off topic. Let's get back to the passage."

### 3. Summarizing the Discussion

One of the most important roles of a group leader is summarizing the discussion so the group will be able to apply it at a later date. You may ask the group such questions as, "We have been having a very good discussion. Who will try to summarize the main things we are learning (or we have said) in just one or two sentences?" Another way to help the group summarize is to ask, "If a stranger rang the doorbell and asked you what our group discussed tonight, what would you say?" Then keep the discussion going by asking, "Who else? Would you say anything different or in addition to what he (or she) said?"

### 4. Applying the Discussion

Application questions can be the most powerful part of your discussion. Help each member of the group verbalize how they will apply the Bible passage to their lives. Ask such questions as:

- Of all that was discussed tonight, what one thing do you want to remember all week?
- Specifically, how will your life be different this week because we studied this passage tonight?
- What do you hope to do differently or more of based on what we talked about tonight?
- In light of what we have learned tonight, does anyone here have anything they'd like to confess or share with the group?

Build your group on a firm foundation of the Word of God. Study it, discuss it and, most importantly, *apply* the Word to your lives!

### Action Points:

1. Take what you've learned in this chapter and apply it to your next week's small group study and application time.
2. Then, take five minutes at the end of the meeting to ask the group if they saw any differences and what they thought of the changes, if any were made.<sup>52</sup>

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1: *Serendipity Bible for Groups* (Littleton, CO: Serendipity House, 1988) has many helpful icebreaker questions.

# CHAPTER 4

## Works: Ministry Matters

**W**hen Cathy and I graduated from college, my parents gave us one of the greatest presents we have ever received. They helped us by paying for a trip to the Holy Land. One of the images I remember best is that of the Dead Sea. It is a bizarre place close to where Sodom and Gomorrah are believed to have been. The Dead Sea is actually a large lake fed primarily by the Jordan River.

The Dead Sea is also called the Salt Sea. It is surrounded by cliffs and is the deepest body of water on earth. It is so dark it is almost black in color. It is saltier than the ocean.

I will never forget trying to go for a swim in the Dead Sea. The water is so thick it was like wearing a life jacket. You can practically sit on the surface of the water. When you get out of the water, you are covered with a greasy, salty film that feels gross. The reason it is called the Dead Sea is because, while it is a very deep body of water, it's also very dead because it has no outlet; there is almost no organic life in its waters.

Because of that amazing experience overseas, God has taught me a profound spiritual principle. Too many small group members are like the Dead Sea. They take in rich deposits of truth and have become very deep. Yet they are stagnant and spiritually dead. Why? Just like the Dead Sea, they have no outlet because they never get involved in ministry.

When I use the word *ministry*, I am using it as the Bible does, referring to acts of service. It speaks of the service we give in our group, to our group members and through our group to others.

## **Three Realizations about Effective Ministry**

The idea of ministry is simply serving others to equip and empower them to serve King Jesus. In order for ministry to be effective in a small group environment there are some simple ideas to keep in mind.

### **1. Every Group Member Is a Minister**

The word *Christian* means “little Christ.” It means that we are to be like Jesus. What was Jesus like? Jesus described Himself this way: “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45). Notice the words *serve* and *give*. Ministering, serving and giving are characteristics of the true followers of Jesus Christ.

### **2. Every Ministry Is Important**

Paul likened the church to a body. Notice the similarities. “*As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable*” (1 Corinthians 12:20–22).

Every part is necessary. Therefore, every part has dignity. There are no insignificant parts, and there are no insignificant ministries. Real ministry is a lifestyle. Some of the personal ministries in your group could include praying daily for missionaries, watching the neighbor’s kids after school, tutoring at-risk inner-city children, teaching English as a second language, or helping an elderly person by doing his or her yard work.

Every group has numerous ministries that are not always noticed but are highly important for the weekly meeting. There is cleaning of the house, preparing of the snacks, caring for the children, leading worship and preparing the icebreaker. We can pray for other group members daily. Take meals when one is ill. Visit them in the hospital when it is needed. Help other members of your group move furniture, or paint their house, or remodel their basement.

Beyond that, every church has a plethora of unnoticed ministries: helping weekend service attendees with parking their cars, running the audio and video board for the worship team and pastor, ushering, greeting, setting up chairs, praying before and during the worship services, changing diapers in the nursery, teaching preschoolers, sponsoring teenagers, counting the offering, folding bulletins and answering phones — just to name a few! All are often overlooked but very important.

There are no unimportant servanthood ministries. Every single one is vital to the success of a small group and a church.

### **3. Every Ministry Is Enhanced When Shared with Others**

One of the best bonding tools for your group is to serve together. It is often a great deal of fun. Some groups work together to feed the homeless once a month. Others get together to clean a widow's yard or watch children so single moms can have a night out. Some roof a member's house. Others help someone clean up a basement or a yard after a bad storm. Some help build houses for the poor.

How your group serves does not matter as much as actually doing something, and doing it together. Every group and every group member needs a ministry outlet so they don't become like the Dead Sea.

#### **Action Points:**

1. Take notice and appreciate the ministries your group members carry out each week.
2. Make a schedule of some ministry projects your group can do together in the next three months to strengthen the team and give each person an outlet.<sup>55</sup>

# CHAPTER 5

## Witness: How to Be a People-Reaching Group

**A**ny small group that possesses a passion for reaching people for Christ will be successful if they follow a few basic practices. For example, the group my family led for a few years started with a handful of youth and eventually grew to over fifty high school students meeting in one house (in six groups) and another fifteen students meeting at a second home. The best thing about this is that dozens of unchurched young people found Jesus as a result of our small groups. It was one of the most fulfilling and fun groups I ever led.

In the years since that time, I have stuck to these basic practices with every small group I've led and coached, including many adult groups. You might be thinking it grew because members of the group were students, but that's not the case. We were effective because we intentionally practiced ten keys that allowed us to reach people for Christ.

### **Faith**

We believed that God wanted people saved more than we did. Therefore, all we had to do was cooperate with Him. We developed a strong expectation that if we invited people, they would come. We also decided that if we shared the gospel, they would respond. Of course, not every member of the group did these things, but enough responded to cause us to believe that God honored our efforts. Rod Dempsey & Dave Earley 56

## **Prayer**

Evangelism is a spiritual war that is best fought on one's knees. As long as we were *consistently* praying that God would save souls, He did! Before events where the gospel was to be presented, we intensified our prayers and God always granted a harvest.

## **Love**

Evangelism is a relational process involving three successive victories: First, we won people to ourselves. Second, we won people to our group. Third, we won people to Christ. Lots of believers wonder why they cannot win people to Christ, and it's because they don't win them as a true friend first.

## **Invitation**

If you invite them, they might come. But if you don't invite them, they'll probably never come. Unsaved people rarely just drop into a group on their own. A vast majority of the time, one or more members of the group made the effort to invite them. Remember: T.E.A.M. (Together Everyone Accomplishes More). It's corny, but true! Periodically, we would ask various group members to share how they came to our group. With only a few exceptions, each person shared how they were invited by *four or five group members* before they decided to give it a try.

## **Gospel**

Never underestimate the power of the gospel. Every four to six weeks we would share the story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We would also share that you can be saved by admitting your sins, believing on Christ for salvation, calling on his name to save you and committing your life to Him. Without exception, people responded.

## **Process**

Evangelism is a process leading to an event. Few people are ready to give their lives to God the first time they are invited to group. I taught my small group members to be patient, helping them understand it takes weeks, months and even years of inviting, praying, loving and hearing the Word before the soil is ready to yield a harvest. Leading Healthy, Growing, Multiplying Small Groups 57

## **Party**

Never underestimate the power of a party to draw a crowd! Every two months we planned social gatherings. Amongst ourselves we jokingly called these social gatherings “sinner dinners.” We found that we could double our attendance and get non-churched students to come to our house if the kids invited them to a “party.” We have found if we have a theme (“Squirt Gun Wars,” “I Hate Winter,” “Halloween Bonfire,” and “Fifties Night” are always hits), grill some hot dogs and play a few corny games, we’ll have a crowd. They will have a blast and will listen intently to a few of their friends share their story of how they came to a personal relationship with Jesus.

We have had as many as eighty-nine kids show up and as many as a dozen make salvation decisions for Christ — all because we had a party. Adults enjoy parties, too. You’d be surprised how many of your group friends will come to a game night or get together to watch a movie. Just remember that guests love to contribute, so ask them to bring something tasty and they’ll instantly feel at home at the gathering.

## **Testimony**

One of the easiest ways to gain attention, sustain interest and preach the gospel without being “preachy” in your small group meetings is to have someone share how they came to Christ. It is wise to have a testimony that somewhat mirrors the people you hope to reach. For example, if you are inviting unsaved husbands to your group have a former unsaved husband share how he came to Christ.

## **Celebration**

In Luke 15, we find three stories of something lost being found: a lost sheep (vs. 1–7), a lost coin (vs. 8–10) and a lost son (vs. 11–31). In each case, the event was marked by a celebration. Maybe God would give us more opportunities to win the lost if we truly rejoiced when one was found. The celebration can be as simple as cheering for and hugging the new believer or as big as a full-blown party. How you celebrate is not as important as the fact that you celebrate.

## **Action Points:**

1. As a group discuss witness options.
2. Pick a few of these practices to become a people-reaching group.
3. Start incorporating them into your group until people are consistently coming to Christ.

**For more information on this subject read:**

- ***Healthy a Healthy, Growing, Multiplying Group***