

Life Groups – For Leaders and Potential Leaders

Part 6: Practical Expectations for Deacons

The audio version of this teaching can be downloaded from <http://cornerstonechurch.co.za/life-groups-practical-expectations-for-deacons/>

In part 5 of this part of the series for leaders and potential leaders we looked at shepherding in more detail. Now we will focus more on practical issues, starting with the practical expectations of deacons.

Following up newcomers

Who is the church?

We are the church. So when we say we are Cornerstone church, we are a body of believers who call ourselves Cornerstone Church. We aren't some organisation, we're a people.

At some point in our personal histories we decided that this was going to be our spiritual home. But what was it that made us decide that? Was it the coffee? The music? The boys and girls? Location? There are many reasons why people come to a church. But what keeps us here is important and it's important how we welcome anyone new in and let them know who it is we are.

On Sunday mornings, usually our time to corporately worship the King, we have a lot of visitors. There's a lot that happens on those mornings that we do to help people that are either new to Cornerstone or new to Jesus altogether. The Word gets preached of course, which is important, but we also want to connect with people personally which is why we have a Visitors Lounge at the back of our auditorium in Bedfordview.

On a Sunday morning we usually ask who is new and people put up their hand and we get a 'visitors card' to them. Why do we do that and what do we do with it? Here's what we do when this card lands on someone's hand.

- We will not over-administrate them

Systems don't shepherd us. Pastors and deacons shepherd us.

From the outset it's important to remember that no one should be part of a process and the heart of doing all this is not to put anyone through a process. It's not good knowing you're part of a process. We don't have some ladder people need to climb. We want to honour people and we've put together administration to do that, but we won't over-administrate or pester people.

We are not in the business of selling Cornerstone but simply want to help people integrate into a healthy body of believers – whether it's us or someone else.

- The visitors card asks for some details – name, address, phone numbers, email, a short reason why they are here, what age group they fall in, and some other details.
- We invite them to join us for a cup of coffee at the Visitors' Lounge at the back of the auditorium. Here we have coffee, tea and other drinks as well as some treats.

We have helpers that serve in a number of ways to make it easier for us to connect with people personally.

We must honour what people are going through in this process. If you're new, it takes some guts to put up your hand in the first place, as not everyone is very outgoing. Filling in the card takes another decision. Coming to the Visitors Lounge is even more gutsy. People do these things, despite their reserved personalities or our culture, because they are genuinely looking to connect; are genuinely looking for help; or are genuinely in a place of decision in a number of areas in their lives. That's why we've dubbed that lounge the "valley of decision".

All kinds of people come to the Lounge. Some were invited by a friend. Others have wandered away from Christ and are just being honest about it. On that Sunday, in that lounge, they often embark on a new journey. Some are looking for another church. Some are not happy with the church they're at. And some are disgruntled with their church.

The last category mentioned need to be handled with care and responsibility. We have a saying here that if you come through the front door you leave through the front door. If someone is disgruntled or hurt with their old church, they must sort it out there first before coming here. We try and encourage people to do that. We can't hold their hand but we encourage them to do that. They might come here but if they haven't dealt with that baggage they will bring it here too. Sooner or later it will come out when they begin to find that this church also has people in it, and people hurt people – it's inevitable.

Then some are church hopping and say that they just "go where the Spirit leads them". They love God but they're not seeing that they must be integrated and functioning in a body. We want to help them get there, even if it's not this body.

- In the lounge we get to know them a little better, ask them questions, understand their needs and where they're at, and look to be friendly and personal. This is not just about 'getting it done' but about really helping people through the decisions they have to make.
- We also tell them a little bit about who we are as a church and what we're about. We then introduce them to:
 - DNA. Why? Because this is our course that will tell them exactly who we are, what the leaders expect from them and what they can expect from the leaders.

At DNA we look to have an open slate and tell people exactly who we are, our values and so on. People must know what we value if they want to be a part of us. People should be able to hold us accountable to what is taught there. Very often what happens is people go to a church but only discover years down the line what that church teaches on certain issues, and then they realise they don't want to be a part of it. At DNA we look to be up front to avoid this issue.

- Life Groups. Why? Because we want people to be able to connect into the life of this church as soon as possible.
- We ask them about a follow-up visit. On Wednesdays people go out to the

homes of people that have asked for a follow-up visit, where we can talk about where they're at, their needs etc. in an environment that's much more comfortable for them and where they can meet more people from Cornerstone.

- Notes are made at the back of the visitors lounge of the discussion. These notes are important to the elder who will be calling them the next day.
- The call is just to thank them for coming. We don't want to over-administrate, we just want to thank them. We might re-iterate DNA, the Life Groups or a follow-up visit.
- Details are captured on a spreadsheet which the elders share over the Internet. We want to make sure we follow guys up well, so these details might include a more appropriate time to call and so on.
- If they would like to integrate we'll allocate them to an area which will get picked up by a specific elder and then things carry on from there. We believe that people need to make the decision to integrate and make themselves accountable. They need to decide to connect as much as the leaders look to help them do that.
- Once people are integrated we want to start having them function in the life of the church – discover their gifts and so on. This is where leaders and Life Groups come in again.
- That functioning is not a list of things to fill the week with but can take all kinds of forms, like hospitality when people from the country come to visit or minister, etc.
- This is a big church and this process is to help each and every person be connected with personally. There are at least 50 to 60 people that serve here at Bedfordview on a Sunday morning and there's a lot going on. That kind of serving in a life group is imperative as well.
- The Life Groups help a large church like Cornerstone to function as a family not an organisation or business. This is because relationships happen in Life Groups. We're not trying to run a process but help people integrate and then function, to bring life into their lives and have an appropriate setting where Jesus can work in them.

It's good to understand the process so that, as leaders, we know where we can help and also how to get people integrated and functioning. The heart of not over-administrating needs to be clear as it also affects the way we should lead our Life Groups.

Preparing the heart for a life group meeting

1 Corinthians 3

3 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For

while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. 11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

This is a terrifying scripture and when we read it it becomes evident that when it comes to leadership and life and being a Christian these days, one of the last things most people like to talk about is facing Jesus one day. Not everyone feels confident about how they will be received. For some of us we think of how the groom will be waiting for us but when he sees us he'll give us that 'look' – that look of, "I know where you were last night".

While people don't like to talk about this, this does serve as a motivation. The reason why this is important for the practical is because our practices take form when the heart is right. Without the heart practice becomes formal (and others feel it) and practice feels like everyone's telling you what to do (it becomes law). But when the heart's right there is a flow that comes and you have energy to do this thing called 'leading'.

Every time we get together the idea is that in some way we're building other people's lives. Sure, this text shows that we are building ours too. But the point is that we should be looking carefully at our own lives and the lives of others in building them. We're really thinking about this. We're being intentional, not all about hype or beating our chests in a frenzy but actually not doing anything.

We need to be aware of with whom we're working with (Jesus) and how and why. When we prepare for a Life Group meeting, we do it with all this in mind – we want to see people mature and grow. We want to help them build with gold so that on that day they meet Christ it will be a joyous occasion where Jesus really does run towards them smiling and they receive a grand reward.

We want to teach them about godliness, about the Christian life, about Christian practice;

about giving themselves to the church and reaching the community; about deep prayer; about fellowship; about faithfulness; about serving each other; about patience and humility; about loving each other and not comparing; about not making ourselves seem better than we are; about not wearing masks.

That's what we're all wanting and that's where we're taking people. We want to see all flourish. We want to be like Jesus where He says He will not break a bruised reed (Isaiah 42:3). He isn't going to destroy or hurt someone who is battling. We want to think about others and where they are carefully, we want to pray with them, we want to ask God to help them.

This is not easy work.

Expectations believers have on leaders

So, with all this in mind, here are the expectations believers have on leaders in the church:

- Because there is an expectation on believers to become involved and grow, there is (rightly) an expectation on leaders to do whatever possible to help them do that
- There is an expectation (rightly so) that leaders will really care and not just be concerned with their own family and home. We can spend our whole lives doing that and in all honesty God has called us to do more than just that.
- There is an expectation that leaders won't just go through the motions. That they won't just administrate and facilitate.
- There's an expectation that leaders would be masterful builders (as 1 Cor 3 above stipulates). We will hold people up and not let them fall. We're not putting behaviour on people but encouraging them into the life of the local church.
- We create the space to be with each other. We don't all come to a prayer meeting, for example, but instead we come to learn to pray and mine the depths of prayer. Same with worship or any meeting context.
- There's an expectation that leaders will lay aside things. Some aspects of your life are not more important than what's going on at a local church and being involved in it.
- There's an expectation that leaders would work into nations and so on as they bring others to Jesus and encourage them also to work into nations, to contribute, to find what it is they need to do.
- We build towards others, not ourselves. In 2 Timothy 4:6, Paul says He is being poured out like a drink offering. The context is that the drink offering in the Old Testament – which was wine mixed with spices – would be poured over an animal sacrifice to improve the smell. So the scripture is saying that leaders pour themselves over the works of what their people are doing so that those peoples' works can be seen, not the leaders' works. We display our group to the world, pouring ourselves over them and what they're doing so that all of that becomes a pleasant incense to the Lord.

Practically leading a life group

Life Groups are not:

1. A Sunday meeting. There's a Sunday meeting for a Sunday meeting purpose. There's no pressure or expectation to perform things in the same way. There's no ritual, routine or liturgy.
2. A lecture or study. It's not a great time of preparation and preaching that should be recorded and put on the Internet! If your teaching is that good, God will bring you there, you don't need to use this platform to do it.
3. Haphazard. They are relaxed (compared to our corporate meetings especially) and at a home, but the leaders plan intentionally for the night.
4. Purely a social gathering. There are times for that but not every time. There may be social aspects, for example a time of PlayStation or the like, but we build Life Group nights around Jesus not around 30 Seconds! Socialising is important but it's all part and parcel of what Life Groups are about, not the main focus.
5. A time to build your own following around your own pet doctrines or your own vision for where the church should go.

You must talk to your leaders about any problems you might have with where things are going, not to your group. If you do the latter what you don't want to happen will happen – the church will get hurt, people in your group will get disgruntled and offended with leaders, and there is division. You end up raising people who are critical and don't love Jesus and His church and hold on to hurts. You might not want to see that happen, but it will.

Life Groups are:

1. A place of encouragement. Here everyone is building and growing and learning about their relationship with God and one another.
2. A time of worship.
3. A time of contribution. Try and get people to speak. Try keep the conversation on track or come up with an answer at the end. It's not easy but it's part of what the time is about. You want to look at Sunday's message and together work out how it can be applied. You're making Christianity practical for the guys.
4. A time of prayer. Pray for each other. Encourage each other.
5. A time of bringing your life. You bring everything of who you are to the time with your Life Group – your heart, prayer, devotion time, family, home, marriage and so on. This is what leadership is about.

Speak to the elders

It's important that deacons and leaders build a relationship with the elders and do their best to avoid misunderstandings. Experience shows that most of the time that people get offended, upset or confused is simply because they're not talking to the other party.

If you feel that something's not happening at church that should be happening, it's not

going to change unless you say something about it. The enemy uses these sorts of things to cause division. If an elder is doing something that bothers you, then you need to speak to him about it, otherwise he's just going to keep doing it and you're going to continue to be bothered by it.

A note on performance and offending others

Leading a Life Group is not about performing, although in our culture it can very often feel that way. Many people will come to your group looking for a performance, which is an unfortunate reality. Just do your best, trusting God for these people, and carry on. You best realise that you will no doubt offend someone at some stage, so prepare your heart for that.

Last thoughts

This is slow, steady, deep and hard work. But it's easy to build with straw and wood. Anyone can put together a Christian life that looks good to their friends but one day the one thing that we don't like to think about will happen – Jesus will weigh our work. Jesus is using us to help build others' lives and our own in His masterful way. So let's build it!

So, you still want to be a leader? God has called you so go and do it. If this scares you, ask him to encourage you.

We'll be expounding on leading a life group practically in the final part of this series.

Questions:

1. How do we follow up those who are new to our local church?
2. What kind of preparation should go into a life group meeting?
3. What expectations do believers of this local church have of life groups?