

## LEADING SMALL GROUPS IN PRISON - THE MISSING LINK



### **The Purpose of small groups in Prison**

“After four decades of prison ministry, I have observed that the essential needs of Christian offenders in their journey of redemption, spiritual growth in Christ, and reintegration into the community remain unmet. The establishment of small learning groups, both within and outside prison walls, is crucial for successful reentry, surpassing the importance of employment, housing, and other factors. These groups, led by strong Christian mentors, provide the necessary support and continuity for offenders. Upon release, it is imperative that these individuals continue to receive guidance from dedicated Christian mentors within the church, fulfilling their spiritual and communal needs. The Book of Philemon serves as a vital tool to inspire and guide prison volunteers, illuminating their calling to bridge this critical gap.” –Chaplain Richard Moyer

Unlike small groups found in local churches and the community, the small groups developed inside the walls of incarceration have similar yet unique purposes. Without understanding the purposes, objectives and goals of small groups and their distinctiveness in the prison setting the leadership of these groups will suffer and provide little direction. We will not cover all the specifics of small group leadership, but we intend to discuss the significant aspects of small groups in prison using the Epistle of Philemon as a framework for understanding.

### ***Finding Purpose for Groups in the Bible***

It would seem rather straightforward to discover and to note where groups are found in the Bible. In fact the number of groups found would probably be limited only by one’s imagination. But far more important is the question of *why* certain groups exist in the Bible. It is in the answer to this question that we may begin our journey of purpose.

In the very beginning of Genesis at the act of creation we are introduced to the fellowship of the Trinity the first known group. The fellowship of the Trinity is a topic too vast to cover but it provides us with the foundational need for groups among humanity. Genesis 1:26 states, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: . . .” (NIV) This “likeness” creates within man the need for fellowship just as there is fellowship in the Trinity.

“Within the triune Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), God has been uppermost in His own affections for all eternity. Therefore, God has been supremely happy in the fellowship of the trinity.”<sup>1</sup> “Ultimate reality is a community of persons who know and love one another. That is what the universe, God, history, and life is all about. . . . We believe the world was made by a God who is a community of persons who have loved each other for all eternity. You were made for mutually self-giving, other-directed love. Self-centeredness destroys the fabric of what God has made.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it was this fellowship that prompted God to make the declaration in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good that man should be alone; . . .” (NIV) Fellowship is the very essence of the DNA of humanity to need community.<sup>3</sup> The fall into sin “created a vacuum” which humanity has sought to fulfill ever since that tragic moment.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, there are numerous illustrations of filling this vacuum of sin in the development of the Jewish nation in the Old Testament to support small group dynamics. During this period God’s desire for fellowship prompts Him to develop Israel into a community. “He had chosen Israel so that they could build a community of faith that would influence other nations for His glory (Ex 33:15-16).”<sup>5</sup> But His chosen “group” failed to fulfill His desire for community within the world and with Himself.

Jesus entered the world scene to correct what humankind failed and could not do over the centuries and that is to restore fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 2:17-19, 22)<sup>6</sup> When He calls the *Twelve* (Mark 3:13-14) Jesus reestablishes the need for small group fellowship and community with the God Head. Dave Earley rightfully declares Jesus as a small group leader as He prepares the twelve to reach the larger community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the great commission.<sup>7</sup> So it is in the prison that small group ministry finds purpose by providing a divine community of fellowship in preparing inmates for their release into the community of other believers.

It becomes clear in the book of Acts that the small group fellowship dynamics were the essence of church growth during this period. (Acts 5:42; 12:12; Rom. 16:5) “The church needed the house church for its survival.”<sup>8</sup> Inmates also need the solid and sure dynamic found in the small group design and preparation for their transition back into society.

Just as God used the nation Israel to create the fellowship He desires with man, Paul in the New Testament Epistles develops the “one another” dynamics of group community.<sup>9</sup> These many “one another” commands form the core of the small group community of fellowship within the Church, the Body of Christ. This provides the “intentionality” that is stressed for small groups. Without purpose and intent, the groups formed become nothing more than cliques or social gatherings. The small group dynamic is an intentional effort to create fellowship with the Father through the Son empowered by the Holy Spirit so that members grow into the image of Christ fulfilling their natural, spiritual, and communal needs as found in Scriptures.

### ***Finding Purpose for Groups in Prison***

After teaching *The Purpose Driven Life*<sup>10</sup> to three small groups of inmates over a period of three months the results were almost astounding. Each participant began to crystallize their purpose and the reason for the destructive life they had lived. This may not seem significant to the average Christian but inside corrections discovering this kind of truth is life changing. Not only did it create a sense of peace for each inmate it helped them to begin moving forward in their new life in Christ by discovering each of the five purposes discussed.

The first purpose for small groups is the dynamic created to help each other become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Romans 8:29, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”(NIV) “The small group environment facilitates apprenticeship

and leadership maturity.”<sup>11</sup> The importance of a godly group leader cannot be stressed enough in the development of the inmate group into the image of Christ inside the prison walls.

The next purpose for small groups is found in the *κοινωνία* fellowship of the New Testament. Romans 12:5, “so we, [being] many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” “Christians need relationships to grow. We don’t grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship. There is no room for lone ranger Christianity in the church and the first church did not support such an idea.”<sup>12</sup> Fellowship builds and nurtures Christians. Inmates must find a fellowship to fill the vacuum of their gang like existence on the streets.

The third reason for group purpose is that Christians are being shaped for ministry. Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” This process of re-shaping also includes an element of taking off the old life and putting on the new life for the inmates. There needs to be a safe and open environment for the inmate to accomplish this. “The small group process is undoubtedly one of the most strategic ministries for making disciples of Jesus Christ”<sup>13</sup> to provide that safety for disclosure and intimacy.

The fourth reason is that of developing each group member’s mission. John 17:18, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” Just as the Lord exemplified fulfilling the purposes of God, so are His children to emulate Him in fulfilling their purpose found in their redemption. By seeing the examples of others, by fellowshiping with others in true agape love demonstrating the “one-another principles,” and by discovering what God has ultimately designed us for, each member will discover their “mission.” Understanding the big picture often takes the input, encouragement and advice from a leader who can be tried, trusted, and found true.

The fifth reason for group ministry is they exist for God’s good pleasure. We have the inherent need for togetherness and belonging as seen in the image of the Trinity. 2 Corinthians 5:18, “And all things [are] of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;” This idea of reconciliation to God brings us full circle back to God’s original intent for mankind, His good pleasure and fellowship with Him. Developing our friendship with others while developing our friendship with God is what I consider true worship.

Somehow through these small groups in prison we can provide a sweet fragrance from a putrid cell when we mirror the harmony, love, and worship of the Trinity. The more we imitate Jesus Christ individually and as a group in prison, the more pleased He is. The more we sacrificially give of ourselves the more we reflect what He has given us in Jesus Christ. The more we understand Him through His Word and live by its guidance, the more we reflect the heavenly kingdom we shall all inherit, doing His will here as it is in heaven. From the Tabernacle to the Temple, to the Church of God, He has provided an image of the eternal Kingdom which is found in small groups with the intentionality to please and glorify God in all they do.

### ***Finding Group Perspective in Philemon***

The book of Philemon provides a significant perspective for leadership of small groups in prison. “Maybe it's all for the best that you lost him for a while. You're getting him back now for good—and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me—he'll be even more than that to you.” (Message 15-16) This text provides the needed perspective for the small group in prison and for the inmate participants.

With this text the inmates can now see a divine purpose for their incarceration. The group leader can also develop an understanding as to why the inmate went astray. Finding the sovereign purpose and grace of God is the beginning and

foundation for the ministry on the inside. Without this shared purpose the group and participants may drift aimlessly between the need for justice, a demand for mercy and the guile of guilt.

The goals of the group will greatly affect the response of the group members. If a small group loses its sense of purpose, it disintegrates rapidly. If a member stops seeing that purpose as important, then his involvement in the group decreases. Individual group members may have different purposes but need to share in the common purpose. The individual purposes make up hidden agendas.<sup>14</sup>

Hidden agendas may range from meeting other gang members to simply getting out of the cell for the night. But rest assured inmates usually have ulterior motives and the leadership must be strong enough to re-focus the group.

Not only is the importance of finding divine purpose significant for the group leader but having a grasp of the variables of groups in prisons also play a significant role in success.

Among the minor variables relative to group work we list *background of the members, life span of the group, and whether participation is required or voluntary*. The point here is that the leader, whether emerging from the group, elected by the group, or appointed by a higher authority, must constantly consider these variables, which usually condition the results of group activity.

One new variable has burst upon the scene in recent years' research regarding how followers form leaders.<sup>15</sup> Putting this in the context of prison we can compare what he says about the early days of the disciples and forming future leaders in prison.

Let's return a moment to the disciples. Not one of them could have been identified as a leader in his early days with the Lord. Jesus knew that; they knew that; and we should know it as well. They learned leadership because leadership is learned behavior, and they learned leadership through followership . . .<sup>16</sup>

There is perhaps no greater way to develop inmate leadership in their church, family, and community than small groups. By having a small group experience they grasp the significance of leadership from a Christian perspective not worldly views of dominance and manipulation. By developing biblical purposes and finding providential design the group leader can begin the process of discipleship by being a significant role model.

### **The Power of Small Groups in Prison**

The true power of small groups in prison is found in what Paul declares to Philemon concerning Onesimus, "He was useless to you before; now he's useful to both of us. I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so. I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help while I'm in jail for the Message. But I didn't want to do anything behind your back, make you do a good deed that you hadn't willingly agreed to." (The Message) Here we can see that God significantly transformed the life of Onesimus and Paul. Onesimus was a powerful minister inside prison and Paul was confident that he would be just as powerful for Philemon. This development, from useless to useful, was the result of Paul's model, mentorship, and motives for discipleship.

#### ***The Model of Small Groups***

Paul wrote to Philemon, "While here in jail, I've fathered a child, so to speak." (The Message) The lack of fatherhood inside prisons is a significant factor for leadership development. "I am convinced that the absence of a positive authority figure—a father figure—in their lives is a very crucial factor in these sad statistics. The absence of involved

fathers helps account for the high crime rate in poor, urban neighborhoods, and the high rate of incarceration for one race.”<sup>17</sup>

Paul modeled a father’s love, authority, and guidance for Onesimus. Leadership in prison must have these three aspects as a minimum when holding groups and leading inmates. Another dimension found almost exclusively in Christianity is unconditional love. “One of the most important jobs of the church is helping ex-offenders come to terms with authority is to serve as models of our heavenly Father’s persistent, powerful, and unconditional love.”<sup>18</sup>

Another significant problem resulting from no fatherhood and a necessary requirement to understand for leadership is the amount of *anger* found in prisons. “The vast number of people in prison struggle with problems of anger.”<sup>19</sup> But rather than blame his father for the many years of angry outbursts Lennie Spitale connects this rage with our very nature.

It wasn’t until I met God through Jesus Christ that I realized that all my early rebellion was not against my earthly father at all. When I threw off my earthly father’s authority, I was really rebelling against my heavenly Father. And the rebellion wasn’t environmental; it was genetic. We are born rebels. I thank God eternally for the undeserved grace he has given me. It is a freedom that can infect, engage, and touch the next generation of angry young men and women. Jesus alone has that kind of power!<sup>20</sup>

Modeling a father’s love and a life void of anger in small groups is perhaps the easy part of group leadership. The difficult part and often neglected part are modeling an exemplary Christian lifestyle. “An often-neglected part of leading a local church is the element of providing an exemplary lifestyle for the flock to follow.”<sup>21</sup> All Christians are to emulate mature disciples.

God’s people should emulate not only mature disciples but also the men whom God has given to them as spiritual leaders (Eph. 4:11-13). They in turn, in accord with testimonies of the apostolic circle, should strive to model Christ, who alone displays the perfect moral image of God. In the New Testament the vital link of ethical emulation, represented in the church leaders, is particularly conspicuous.<sup>22</sup>

“The number one motivational principle in the world is: *People do what people see*. . . People’s minds are changed more through observation than through arguments.”<sup>23</sup> Although it is speculation we must assume that Onesimus spent much time observing the Apostle while they were chained together in prison. The Apostle Paul was able to father him and not only father but mentor him to the point of becoming a significant support in Paul’s life in prison.

### ***The Mentor of Small Groups***

One of the most significant aspects of small group leadership in prison is the role of mentorship. Discipleship mentoring has become the premiere dynamic impacting ministry in prisons today especially with juveniles. We do not read much about Paul’s mentoring of Onesimus but in verses 15-16 Paul writes, “. . . and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother!” (The Message) The elevation from slave to a true Christian brother suggests small group leadership has the potential of developing inmates.

Mentoring is a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a less skilled or experienced one with agreed upon goals of having the less skilled person grow and develop specific competencies. Mentoring is an individualized, one-to-one environment for the exchange of experience and wisdom. One moves from equipping to mentoring when the focus shifts from the job-task-organization to the growth and development of the person. Mentoring occurs when we have transcended the position and focus on achieving the wants or

needs of the protégé. A mentor is a guide. Mentors lead others through new terrain because they have been there before and are equipped to lead. Mentors model what they want their followers to do. Mentoring is a relational experience through which one person empowers another person to fulfill God's design for their lives. A mentor is a tutor, a coach, a door opener, a way shower, a corrector, an encourager, and a guide. A mentor is a person who believes in you and wants to see you win.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously, a well-written definition is easier to achieve than finding one who exemplifies all these characteristics, especially in prison.

What separates the small group leader from a bible study teacher, or a worship leader is that the later often simply provide information with little accountability or emphasis on application. Only through the small group dynamic of mentoring can the disciple move from a receptor of knowledge to an imitator of Christ.

Mentors must resist the temptation to be only tellers.

At times it seems logical to simply tell a mentee what he ought to be doing. Such telling, however, takes the burden of thinking through the problem off the shoulders of the learner and makes him even more dependent upon his newfound 'advisor.' Should the solution be effective, the mentee will return repeatedly to finding solutions to other problems of ever-increasing complexity. If the advice proves inadequate, however, he can always pass along the blame for any negative results directly to the mentor by simply saying, 'I was only doing what he told me to do.'<sup>25</sup>

And unfortunately, this type of blame shifting is quite common in prison culture. But unlike the secular counselors who try to devise elaborate reasons for this type of behavior and suggest some convoluted plan of escape, the mentor has God to depend on for help.

It is only in the Christian process that we discover the true power Paul refers to when he writes concerning Onesimus, "I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so. I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help while I'm in jail for the Message." (The Message 10-12) Onesimus had grown into a very substantial minister while growing under Paul's discipleship by the indwelling power of God. This power must be recognized and used in the small group process of mentoring.

Effectiveness in mentoring is determined by a number of things: the degree of rapport we establish, the effectiveness of the process, and the willingness of the mentee to grow. In Christian mentoring, as Armerding has noted, there resides a supernatural ingredient, both in the life of the leader and the learner, which introduces a dimension that can never play a role in secular mentoring. Christian leaders capitalize upon this factor as we apply the power of the Word of God, the supernatural dynamic of prayer, and the vitality of the Holy Spirit in every mentoring situation.<sup>26</sup>

Although the group leader may be effective by following this advice he can expect little reward. "However, a mentor must make the time commitment, expect little reward, and realize the protégé may equal or exceed him."<sup>27</sup> It is the thought that the inmate, what the world considers trash, may become a gem in God's hands that provides motive for small group ministry.

### ***The Motive for Small Groups***

Obviously as a prisoner Paul was given no choice but to minister in prison. Other than breaking the law and being arrested yourself choosing to lead small groups in prison is not on the top of the normal Christian's to do list. In fact,

many pastors who have toured the prison compound were all too happy to not only leave, but never come back again. Some are so traumatized that they tend to place Prison chaplains on the pedestal of martyrdom for the ministry they willingly perform.

The motive for a Christian to become a small group leader is threefold, following the *commission*, accepting the *call*, and responding to the *challenge*. When considering the great commission Rod Dempsey asks a challenging question, “How many Reasons Do You Need? . . . The key to your success is to begin practicing the principles behind the command Jesus gave us. Live your life purposely for God and lead by example.”<sup>28</sup>

Besides the Great Commission and fulfilling its purpose as a group leader he suggests pursuing your dreams for God’s glory.

Being an effective small group leader is more than just leading a group. It is raising leaders to reach the world. It is facilitating the body of Christ to minister to its members. It is creating a spiritual family and building a spiritual army. When small group leaders understand this dream, they immediately raise the value of their group and each of its members.<sup>29</sup>

When you consider the background of inmates, the barriers to their spiritual growth and society’s view of inmates it indeed seems like a dream to believe that they too can become leaders for Christ. And like all dreams the reality of life often mars our expectations.

Following the Great Commission by becoming a group leader in prison may at first look and sound exciting, glamorous, and rewarding. But all too often the appearances vanish quickly, and many do not last long inside the walls of incarceration because they discover this type of ministry is monotonous, unattractive with little to no reward or recognition. If one has not received the call for this type of ministry leadership, they will never survive.

Anyone going into jail/prison ministry should thoroughly evaluate his/her motives for doing so. If you are going to ‘help God out’ or to feel better about yourself, don’t bother going. God does not ‘need’ our help. We must be able to honestly say that our reason for going is to obey God and respond to His invitation to participate in His work.<sup>30</sup>

Prison groups can be at the very least challenging and there are few survivors for those who have not received the call to bring them through this toughness.

Besides the need for a calling to fulfill the commission the leader must understand the challenge that comes from the perception that often prison ministry is treated as a dumping ground for preachers who cannot survive a “real” pastorate. Frequently the church looks at prison ministry with a ‘second tier’ focus – where we send new people or ‘second best’ to learn how to do ministry. It doesn’t rate the top people or top resources.<sup>31</sup> This place group leaders at a disadvantage because inmates have become accustomed to so-called second-best volunteers. Their ability to be minister will automatically be questioned because of this perception. But the challenge is not found in what people think it is found in our relationship to Jesus Christ.

As Paul suggests to Philemon, our motives should be for Christ and from the heart, “You’ll be doing it for Christ, but it will also do my heart good.” (The Word) With this in mind, has remained a challenge for the church. “God’s Word lays a threefold responsibility upon the Church: minister to prisoners, prevent crime, and reform the criminal justice system. Compliance is not optional but essential, if the Church of Jesus Christ is to please its Lord.”<sup>32</sup> As we shall see, accepting this challenge is just one step in the process of small group leadership.

## Problems of Small Groups in Prison

It is not our intent to cover all the statistics, facts, and evidence to demonstrate the difficulties found in the prison ministry. But we will try to discover some key aspects of inmate characteristics, prison environment and ways to hold the inmate accountable and responsible to the call to Christianity in their new life.

Paul writes concerning Onesimus, “He was useless to you before . . . If he damaged anything or owes you anything, chalk it up to my account.” (The Message) Obviously Onesimus demonstrated some characteristics that can be traced to the average inmate profile. We will look at some of those characteristics so that leadership may be developed with them in mind.

### *Difficult People*

It is interesting that when we review the many books on small group leadership difficult people are those who talk too much are inconsistent in attendance or want a soap box to preach their Christianity. Compared to prisoners some of the difficulties discussed in these books would be considered a pleasure to address and resolve.

Dr. A Wyatt Mullinax has one of the most comprehensive and dynamic understandings of prisoners and addictions. His work in Christian restoration had been recognized as one of the most effective in the corrections, specifically Jails.<sup>33</sup>

In response as to how one helps a person with these character flaws, Mullinax writes, Speak the truth in love—confront his self-centeredness and unwillingness to disclose. Explain the difficulty and sometimes monotony of getting his life established responsibly and help him see the bigger picture of life. Where old patterns have crept back into his life remind him of the consequences that will naturally result if they are allowed to continue. Encourage him to verbalize fears and pray with him about them.<sup>34</sup>

These concepts and response are probably one of the most comprehensive understandings of the criminal mind. Understanding these concepts and the direction provided will give the group leader some unbelievably valuable insights and unobstructed vision and direction to create objectives for the group meetings.

Of course there are also the “chronically arrogant, the congenitally belligerent, the non-negotiator, the nitpicker, the wheedler (who needles leadership confidence), and the yes-butter.”<sup>35</sup> “But often the sensitive leader can pick up strains of loneliness and longing that create negative attitudes that are unrelated to what the group is all about. To win over a difficult person is a significant leadership achievement.<sup>36</sup> That should always be the goal for group leadership, especially in the prison setting.

Often the difficulty comes when inner sanctuaries are penetrated. “The hearts behind the masks have a great need for a friend they can trust. The private places of the heart are sanctuaries that are not easily open to others. When a Christian volunteer approaches these inner sanctums, he or she needs to realize that they are cracking this private door open, just a bit.<sup>37</sup> Outbursts and disruptions are merely exterior signs of an interior problem.

With that understanding some good steps for moving past the difficult person: *redirect the question, recognition of wandering, responding to “wrong” answers, reaffirming silence, and responding honestly.*<sup>38</sup> Honesty will make the most impact when responding inside the prison. *Telling it like it will earn far more respect than trying to sugar-coat or sweeten the truth.*

The best advice I could provide for responding to difficult inmates after twenty plus years is to *seek to find the good within the bad, show an extra ordinary amount of grace, remember agape love, never forget where you came from and remember*



*that most of the time it is a test.* Most offenders want to know if you will reject, mock, ridicule, abandon or blatantly deride them like the rest of the people in their failed lives.

### ***Difficult Environment***

One of the most difficult goals for the small group leader inside prisons is creating an environment for discussion and dynamic interaction.

Develop a friendly and permissive atmosphere in the group that is free from domination and threats. This kind of atmosphere encourages participation. To ensure this, the leader will want to use power sparingly. He will give permission to speak, permission to differ, and permission for the group to decide.

. . . The leader should use first names, and call everyone by name in each meeting. He should allow people to speak freely and without permission. He should use buzz groups, group projects, and round robin response and get every member to contribute. Call on quiet group members. Provide a snack time.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps in an ideal situation all these suggestions will work, and they *should* be attempted in the small prison group. But there are some serious barriers specific to corrections that need to be understood before attempted.

“Ministry to convicted felons necessitates being attentive to individual and group dynamics, including the moods of groups as they relate to the total community. This sensitivity is not only important to pastoral care, but it also addresses security and safety concerns.”<sup>40</sup> Some environmental factors to be aware of; daily crisis, defensiveness, incessant environmental stress, constant criticism, diversity of cultures, institutional rules and regulations, constant need for security, trivial requests, (phone calls, pens, etc.), negative view of religion, resistance of authority, manipulation, paranoia, and a constant state of demeaning of the inmates.<sup>41</sup>

There are no number of refreshments, entertainment or niceties that will dispel much of the negative aspects the inmates endure every day. However, in this setting the ministry of presence, just being there, has a far more reaching impact than in most other settings. Being available, demonstrating a Christian outlook, seeking to find the best in the situation and moving forward despite all the depressing pessimistic emotions swirling inside the walls of corrections will create a following and influence.

I am not sure there are any standard answers or books that provide a clearly defined formula to address these issues as a leader. One must simply draw on their years of counseling and experience. After time, like the inmates, group leaders will find themselves becoming accustomed to these facets of the prison environment.<sup>42</sup> This environment and its effects are also a big contributor to one’s ability to enforce group covenants and small group dynamics

### ***Difficult Enforcement***

When you consider all the elements discussed in the previous section, discipline and enforcement become a significant factor for the group leader in prison. Penalties are far more serious, and power is far more crucial than in most group settings in the community.

I have personally found that being a father figure when attempting to discipline, direct and enforce group dynamics works the best. For the most part, men in prison have had no authority figure in their life and will usually back down or respond with respect if you demonstrate a stern loving mannerism that can only come from a father or loving brother.

Some suggestions for the group leader and control are:

- a. He might be punished in a mild and tactful manner.

- b. He could be interrupted. Ask for other comments or facts.
- c. The conversation could be redirected. Simply ignore his request to speak.
- d. Deal with him privately.
- e. Limit the times he can speak in the group.
- f. Avoiding eye contact with him will discourage his participation.<sup>43</sup>

Even though these concepts seem simplistic they are and can be highly effective in the small prison group setting.

One realization that must be accepted by anyone leading small groups in prison is that there will *always* be controversy. Understanding the attitudes of the inmates, the environment they live in, and the ever-present dynamics of the inmate personality should suggest there will not only be conflicts, but they should be expected quite regularly. It is not so important that the leader learns a specific process for dealing with the problem as it is to develop the right attitude when they erupt. Enforcing group rules and covenants can come easily if the group leader demonstrates a consistent fair and loving response.

Conflict should be expected, “Let me suggest a new understanding for the church just starting small groups (and all the others) ‘Conflict is expected and welcome!’ Conflict will happen, and what you make of it—positive or negative—will have an impression.”<sup>44</sup> Attitude is everything when inmates challenge you and intentionally assault your character and integrity. “Often the way leaders respond to conflict impacts how they are resolved. Leaders need to direct their involvement toward dealing with the issues redemptively.”<sup>45</sup> The key word here is redemptive meaning to provide a constructive redemptive conclusion when enforcing small group tenants.

Redemption may not always be possible so having a consistent approach to resolving conflict will help gain respectability. When tough decisions are to be made, I generally use the same concepts that come from a course we teach called *Decisions*. The Mid-Atlantic Thresholds agency has produced a workbook called, *Thresholds Guide to Decision Making and Problem Solving*. The Thresholds Work Book provides a six-step model to decision making; *See the Situation Clearly, Set Your Goals, Explore All the Possibilities, Evaluate the Choices, Decide What You Want and Implement Your Plan*.<sup>46</sup> It is not so much that this is the most effective process to use. It is a fact that when I teach the course to the inmates and then use the principles the impact on the inmates is astounding.

Besides redemptive solutions, good attitude, consistent approaches here is a need for enforcement in small groups in prison.

1. Take control.
2. Deal with it gently but firmly.
3. Warn him once. The second time have him returned to his cell. A third time warrants telling the Officer.
4. If you do not act, you will lose respect for others.
5. Speak to him later.
6. Be open to suggestions from the group.
7. Assess if his issues are relevant to the rest of the group.
8. Wisely allow a mature inmate tactfully to handle it for you. (use caution)
9. Always pray in the Spirit. <sup>47</sup>

The point of losing the rest of the group if you are inactive and take no action is especially important to remember. Many inmates will test to see if you have the fortitude to stand up to a disruptive inmate with a good Christian perspective. A situation like this can be a tremendous factor contributing to your success in group leadership if dealt with appropriately.

## Conclusion

Small group leadership and dynamics can be the most key factor in corrections today to reduce the rate of recidivism in the Christian culture in prison. Using small group dynamics as a leader and using the understanding of prison culture within the framework of Philemon will prove to have a long-lasting impact on the released inmate.

If the group is led properly and the lessons are applied appropriately over time you too will be able to write to any local church as Paul did to Philemon when he wrote, *“So if you still consider me a comrade-in-arms, welcome him back as you would me. If he damaged anything or owes you anything, chalk it up to my account. This is my personal signature—Paul—and I stand behind it. (I don't need to remind you, do I, that you owe your very life to me?) Do me this big favor, friend. You'll be doing it for Christ, but it will also do my heart good. I know you well enough to know you will. You'll probably go far beyond what I've written.”* (The Message)

8	<p><b>Reading Assignment:</b>  <i>Leading Small Groups in Prison – The Missing Link</i>  Redemption and reentry are two powerful concepts of born-again inmates. Try to put yourself in the shoes of Philemon, a runaway servant now a reputable preacher.</p> <p><b>Research</b>  Research web sites that have researched the failures of reentry and how to change it.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p><a href="#">Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry</a></p> <p><a href="#">Rehabilitation through Spirituality and Faith: Why isn't the Prison and Reentry Reform Movement Focused on the Capacity Building of Responsive and Compelling Change Agents?</a></p> <p><a href="#">THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF LONG-TERM, FAITH-BASED REENTRY PROGRAMS AFTER INCARCERATION</a></p> <p><a href="#">“Free but Still Walking the Yard”: Prisonization and the Problems of Reentry - Liam Martin, 2018</a></p> <p><b>Discussion Question:</b>  Is the thesis of creating two small groups, one inside and one outside, a means of changing Christian inmate reentry for the better or for worse?</p>	<p><b>Brief essay of assigned reading</b>  Write a brief reaction paper of 250 words or less containing what you consider to be important in <i>Leading Small Groups in Prison</i>. Provide specific pluses and minuses.</p> <p><b>Internet resources</b>  Provide at least five website resources that fully explain the failure of successful reentry and how it can be changed for success.</p> <p><b>Discussion Question</b>  Respond to the discussion question with 250 words or less. Focus on possible <u>changes</u> where change is rejected and hope is seldom found.</p>
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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, Desiring God (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, rev., and exp. 2003), p.33.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, The Reasons for God, (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), p. 216-215.

<sup>3</sup> Dave Earley & Rod Dempsey, Pocket Guide to Leading a Small Group (Houston, TX: TOUCH Pub., Inc., 2007), p. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Arnold, The Big Book on Small Groups, (Downers, Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, sec. ed. 2004), p. 168

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Earley and Dempsey, Pocket Guide, p. 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold, Big Book, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Shepherd, Building the Dynamics of One Another's "[www.smallgroups.com](http://www.smallgroups.com)," 4/12/2002. Accessed July 2009.  
<http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2002/buildingthedynamicsoftheoneanothers.html>

<sup>10</sup> Rick Warren, Purpose Driven Life, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) We will use the basic five purposes discussed in the text.

- We were planned for God's pleasure, so your first purpose is to offer real worship.
- We were formed for God's family, so your second purpose is to enjoy real fellowship.
- We were created to become like Christ, so your third purpose is to learn real discipleship.
- We were shaped for serving God, so your fourth purpose is to practice real ministry.
- We were made for a mission, so your fifth purpose is to live out real evangelism.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministries (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). p. 113-125.

<sup>12</sup> Rick Warren, Purpose Driven Life, p 33.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Hull, Jesus Christ Disciple Maker, (Old Tappan, NJ, Fleming H. Revell, 1984), p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Dan Burrell, "Lesson 6, Leadership of Small Groups" Lynchburg, VA: Liberty Seminary, Class notes for the course Christian Leadership, DSMN 605, accessed July, 2009. p. 3 of 12

<sup>15</sup> Gangel, Kenneth O. Team Leadership in Christian Ministry. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, rev. ed., 1997), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Don Smarto, Keeping Ex-Offenders Free. (Dallas, TX: Frontline Press, 2001), p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 107

<sup>19</sup> Lennie Spitale, Prison Ministry Understanding Prison Culture Inside and Out, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> John MacArthur ed., Pastoral Ministry, How to Shepherd Biblically, “Modeling” by George J. Zemek (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 226-227.

<sup>23</sup> John Maxwell, Developing the Leader Within You (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 133-134.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Burrell, Small Groups, p. 21 of 27.

<sup>25</sup> Gangel, Team Leadership, p 264-265.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 270.

<sup>27</sup> Dr. Burrell, Lesson 18, “Training and Retaining Staff”, p. 22 of 27.

<sup>28</sup> Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, The Pocket Guide To Leading a Small Group, (Houston, TX: TOUCH Pub., Inc., 2007), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>30</sup> W. Thomas Beckner & Jeff Park, Co-editors. Effective Jail; & Prison Ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Preparation and Training, by Chaplain Jim Spence, (Charlotte, NC: COPE, 1998), p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> W. Thomas Beckner & Jeff Park, Co-editors. Effective Jail; & Prison Ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Successful Ministry Model, by Rev. Jeff Park, COPE, (Charlotte, NC: COPE, 1998), p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> Dale K. Pace, A Christian’s guide to Effective Jail & Prison Ministries. (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976.), p. 33-34.

<sup>33</sup> W. Thomas Beckner & Jeff Park, Co-editors. Effective Jail; & Prison Ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Biblical Cures That Counter Criminal Thinking, by Dr. A. Wyatt Mullinax, (Charlotte, NC: COPE, 1998), p. 29-45.

#### Closed Thinking

*Definition – Not receptive; not self-critical; and no disclosure.*

#### Victimstance

*Definition – Views self as a victim (will blame social conditions, family, past) – blame others.*

#### View Self As A Good Person

*Definition – Focuses only on your own positive attributes; fails to acknowledge your own destructive behavior; builds self-up at others expense.*

#### Lack Of Effort

*Definition – Unwilling to do anything you find boring or disagreeable; “I can’t” means “I won’t.”*

#### Lack Of Interest In Responsible Performance.

*Definition – Responsible living “is” unexciting and unsatisfying, no sense of obligation; and will respond here only if you net an immediate payoff.*

#### Lack of Perspective

*Definition – Does not use past as learning tools; expects others to act immediately on your demands; and decisions based on assumptions, not facts.*

#### Fear of Fears

*Definition – Irrational fears but refuses to admit them; fundamental fear of injury of death; profound fear of put down; and when held accountable one experiences ‘zero state’ = feels worthless.*

#### Power Thrust

*Definition – compelling need to be in control of every situation; uses manipulation and deceit; and refuses to be dependent unless can take advantage of.*

#### Uniqueness

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*Definition – Thinks one is different and better than others; expects of others that which one fails to meet; super-optimism (cuts fear of failure); and quits at first sign of failure.*

Ownership Attitude

*Definition – Perceives all things; people, objects to possess; has no concept of ownership or rights of others; and use sex for power and control, not intimacy*

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> Gangel, Team Leadership, p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 162

<sup>37</sup> Spitalie, Understanding Prison Culture, p. 155-156.

<sup>38</sup> Earley and Dempsey, Pocket Guide, p. 202-204.

<sup>39</sup> Dr. Burrell, Lesson 6, Leadership of Small Groups., p. 9 of 12.

<sup>40</sup> Henry G. Covert, Ministry to the Incarcerated. (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 2-5.

<sup>42</sup> Spitalie, Understanding Prison Culture., Of all books about prison environment and culture, Prison Ministry Understanding Prison Culture Inside and Out is one of the clearest explanations written by an ex-offender . The following chapter titles not only demonstrate an ability to capture the prison environment with few words but provides the reader with the socio-cultural aspects of prison living.

Chapter Titles:

It's a Small World After All (incarcerated with family/friends),

Nowhere to Run (struggle with confinement),

The Culture of Hardness,

Life in a Cage,

Unwritten Code of Ethics (no snitches accepted),

You can Depend on Me (your word is gold),

Yesterday (remember the way it was),

The Same Ol' Same Ol' (mundane life of prison),

Institutionalization, Workin' For the Man (authority),

The Great Equalizer (all in prison are inmates),

I Dream of Jennie (prison rape),

Economics (pack of smokes for money),

Old Friends, and the Intimacy of Forgiveness

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Burrell, Lesson 6 Leadership of Small Groups, p. 10 of 12

<sup>44</sup> Robert Damon, Handling Conflicts, "SmallGroups.com" December 12, 1995. Accessed July, 2009.  
<http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/1995/handlingconflict.html>

<sup>45</sup> Richard Patterson, Effectively Leading. (Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Training Assn., ed.2004), p. 87.

<sup>46</sup> Mid-Atlantic Thresholds, Thresholds Guide to Decision Making and Problem Solving, Seventh Revision, 2004.  
<http://www.thresholdsdelco.org/regionalorganization.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Spitalie, Understanding Prison Culture, p. 233.