

## ROADBLOCKS TO COMMUNITY

Jesus told us in advance that we will have troubles! *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33) This is certainly true as you enter into ministry, and as you begin leading a small group. Trouble is God's way of refining us and sanctifying us (see James 1:2ff) and trouble is also the devil's way of opposing our progress in the kingdom (see 1 Peter 5:8-9). Don't be surprised if trouble comes your way through your group—the very people you are trying to help! Get a group of sinners together and there is bound to be trouble. Here are some guidelines for navigating a few potential land mines!

### 1. Conflict Management

By conflict, we mean an interpersonal conflict or disagreement between members of your group (which is bound to happen and no indication of failure on your part as the leader). As part of discipleship, we would encourage our group members to approach conflict resolution in a biblical manner:

1. What to do if one person sins against another person?

*Some interpersonal conflicts are the result of one person actually sinning against another person.* (based upon Matthew 18:15-17)

*"If your brother..."* It must first be determined that in this situation, all involved are Christians. (Usually this is the case if we're talking about members of a church small group, but sometimes you must assist a member with a conflict they are having with someone outside the group like a relative or co-worker. Then this may become an issue.) The principles Jesus taught in Matthew 18 are for "brothers" (and "sisters")—fellow Christians. There is an assumption of spiritual relationship, as well as a shared experience of forgiveness and a commitment to honesty.

*"...sins..."* Determine if what the person has done was *sinful*—did one person truly sin against another. *Not everything* that offends us or upsets us is a sin, or something that needs confronting. Help those in your group use discernment in this area. It is difficult to discern motives. Don't play God. Try to correct behavior that is visible and damaging to others.

*"...against you, go..."* The wronged party must take the initiative and go to the party who wronged them. Jesus tells us that if we are wronged, we are to take the first step

towards reconciliation. This will involve swallowing pride, pushing through fear and discomfort, and going. Don't use prayer as a means of sharing bad attitudes.

*"...just between the two of you..."* The wronged party should go *directly and privately* to the person who wronged them. People must be taught to not run to others first to discuss their grievances, which is gossip. They will want to do this because of their upset and because it is easier, but they should resist the temptation to relieve this upset by talking about the situation with others. Christians go directly to the person involved. And, they go privately, alone, without an entourage of supporters.

*"...show him his fault..."* People must be instructed on how to confront a person with their sin. It should be done as simply and directly as possible with the least amount of embellishment—in other words, stick to the facts and nothing but the facts. It never helps the situation to exaggerate the details in order to make a case.

*"If he listens, you have won your brother over."* The goal is not to be proven right but to reconcile—to "get a brother back" so to speak. Again, humility is required in this situation on both sides of the fence. Humility to admit wrong-doing, and humility to not just be proven right, but to be reconciled relationally

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*"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along..."* Before you as the leader get directly involved, have people follow these first several steps. If that gets nowhere, then it may be time for you to step in to mediate. **DO NOT AGREE TO MEDIATE IF THE INVOLVED PARTIES REFUSE TO MEET.** We say we follow the Bible—here is where the rubber meets the road. Make sure the two parties have first tried to work it out on their own before stepping in!

## **2. What do I do when one person simply annoys another?**

*Sinners in relationship with each other will eventually rub one another the wrong way and sparks may fly. But that doesn't automatically mean there is sin involved.* (based upon Eph.4:2 and Col.3:13)

*"...bearing with one another in love..."* *"Bear with each other..."* Forbearance is the rarely talked about, lost art of just putting up with other people. It's controlling ourselves when we are provoked, or restraining ourselves when we are annoyed. More often than not, someone has not sinned against us, they have just annoyed us. And the Bible exhorts us to forbear, because this is exactly what God does with us! We don't talk, we don't gossip, we don't complain. We trust ourselves to God, and show the other person kindness in the face of their annoying or upsetting behavior. As long as it's not blatant, harmful sin, we restrain ourselves and our upset.

### **3. What do I do when I have sinned against another?**

*When a person becomes aware of the fact that they have done something wrong to another, the Bible is clear about the course of action. (based upon Matthew 5:23-24)*

*"...if you... remember that your brother has something against you....go and be reconciled"* The context of these two verses is worship, in the temple, before the altar of God. Even at that moment of spiritual devotion, if you recall that someone has something against you, Jesus instructs us to leave the altar and be reconciled to our brother or sister. Jesus places a high priority on reconciliation! He does not want us engaging in spiritual activities when we are estranged from other believers. In this passage it is not clear that we go only if we are guilty of a sin. Jesus says that if our brother has something against us, we are to go. Again, we are told to take the first step. If we are aware of a rift in our relationship, we should take immediate steps to repair it.

### **4. What happens when someone is consistently difficult beyond our capacity to help?**

Sometimes someone in a group will demonstrate weaknesses or flaws that can significantly disrupt a group. The person may consistently dominate all the sharing with their problems, completely unable to see that others in the group have problems too. The person may drain the group's energies and resources by constantly needing help or assistance, without ever offering to help another. The person may emotionally manipulate others, eliciting pity and gaining control over members of the group. For those who consistently exude this kind of behavior, intervention may be required for the health of a group. For one reason or another, if they are not willing to change their behavior, they can destroy a group. The key here is boundaries and maintaining control of the group and loving each person. If a situation arises like this, please contact your small group coach before addressing this person. Creating a healthy boundary and doing it in love will need prayer and partnership with an experienced leader.