

SMALL GROUPS

Small Group Format

- Each prison typically has **30 to 50 inmates**, divided into small **groups of 5 to 9** participants.
- Each small group is assigned **1 to 2 volunteers** to mentor and facilitate discussions.
- Having two volunteers per group ensures continuity and coverage if one needs time off.
- Discussions primarily focus on the weekly book content, with flexibility to briefly explore other relevant topics. Volunteers should gently steer the conversation back to the weekly book content to ensure all planned topics for the program year are covered comprehensively.

Small Group Success

Small group “families” are the backbone of Malachi Dads’ success. These groups work much like small home groups in churches:

- Volunteers and inmates should preferably stay in the same group for the entire program, building trust and strong bonds. But be flexible when adjustments are made during the year.
- Group leaders lead discussions, helping inmates find and replace old, harmful behaviors with new, Godly principles. Let the Holy Spirit guide your discussions.
- Inmate feedback year after year and in all of the prisons consistently highlights the effectiveness of small groups and the lasting impact of Malachi Dads volunteers.

Best Practices

Below are ten tips for fostering productive small group discussions sourced from *Amy Jackson, Managing Editor of Small Groups.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today*. Volunteers can be most effective by simply asking open-ended, thought-provoking questions such as:

- "What do you think about this?"
- "What did you mean when you said ...?"
- "What do you think about the text on page ...?"
- "How have you experienced this?"
- "What is a better way?"

Ten Key Guidelines:

1. **Do not preach—Lead instead.** Empower others to discover scriptural truths for themselves by asking open-ended questions. Avoid turning discussions into lectures or sermons.
2. **Focus on the Holy Spirit’s guidance.** Allow group members to engage with the study materials and apply the text to their lives. While sharing your own experiences is valuable, keep the text as the central focus.
3. **Prioritize community and growth.** Discussions should foster spiritual growth and life change, not theological debates. Stay on-topic to ensure the group stays productive.

4. **Create a safe environment.** Encourage open sharing by affirming comments and avoiding criticism. Make everyone feel valued.
5. **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid simple "yes" or "no" questions. If necessary, follow up with "Why?" to encourage deeper thinking.
6. **Encourage quieter members.** Gently invite participation by addressing individuals by name, but never force anyone to speak. This also helps manage overly talkative members by directing the conversation.
7. **Respond to contributions.** Acknowledge and guide responses by asking follow-up questions or clarifications. Pay attention to nonverbal cues like sighs, groans, or laughter, as these often reveal underlying feelings.
8. **Handle incorrect answers thoughtfully.** Instead of directly correcting a group member, involve the group by asking, "What do others think?" or "Does everyone agree?" Be gentle and address passionate disagreements privately if needed.
9. **Stay on-topic but be flexible.** Acknowledge tangents and suggest returning to the main topic later. Use discernment to decide if a tangent might lead to valuable discussions.
10. **Emphasize application.** Conclude by asking how group members will apply what they have learned. Encourage them to find actionable steps for growth.

The 30-Second Rule

An effective tip for group leadership: avoid answering your own questions too quickly. Leaders often wait just three to five seconds, but this discourages participation and self-reflection. Instead, aim to wait 30 seconds after posing a question.

While 30 seconds may feel long, it gives group members the necessary time to process and respond. If no one answers, someone might ask, "What was the question?"—a sign that it may need to be rephrased for clarity.

Reflection and application questions often take longer to process, so allow 20 seconds or more for meaningful engagement.

Conclusion

As a small group leader, your role is vital. You have the opportunity to partner with the Holy Spirit to inspire growth and transformation in others. With practice, facilitation skills will become second nature.

Lead with intention, offer yourself grace when mistakes happen, and trust that God will use this experience to grow you as well. Embrace the journey with joy, knowing that your efforts have eternal impact.