

## Preparing to Lead

The following information is helpful for anyone preparing to lead a Starting Point group, whether it's your first or fifth group.

### Before the Meeting

#### CO-LEADER MEETING

We highly recommend that each group have two to four leaders, and it's essential for these co-leaders to:

- Meet together preferably at least one week before the group starts.
- Spend some time getting to know one another if you're not already acquainted.
- Talk about your strengths and weaknesses and how you can work together as a team.
- Discuss how you will evaluate the group and provide constructive feedback to one another. It's best if leaders plan to gather for a few minutes after each group meeting. Also, agree to be honest with each other and welcome candid feedback.
- Determine who will be the administrator of the leader team. This person will send out the initial welcome email, remind the entire group of the weekly homework and upcoming socials, and take attendance each week.
- Discuss how the first group meeting will be facilitated. **Each leader should play a role in the first meeting**, even if there is a primary facilitator for the main discussion.
- If there is an apprentice (new) leader, review the principles listed in the [Apprenticeship](#) section.
- If you have information about your group members (e.g., how they got connected to Starting Point or their spiritual backgrounds), review this information. Keep it in mind as you prepare so that you can be sensitive to their needs and questions.
- Pray for the group experience, the first meeting, and each group member by name.

#### CONTACT GROUP MEMBERS

**Email:** One week from date of your first meeting, send out an email making initial contact with your group members. Encourage the group that you look forward to seeing them next week and that you will be following up with a phone call. Remember to blind copy (bcc) your group members because they have not yet given permission to share their information. [tippy title="Leader Tip!"]There are several reasons we prefer the initial contact be through email. First, you have a better chance of actually reaching them. People hesitate picking up a phone call when the number is not one they recognize. If they receive an email first telling them you will be calling, they will be more likely to pick up when they see a new number later in the week. Second, many participants are a little nervous about the whole idea. It is easier to meet you along with the rest of the group via email than have a personal phone call prior to ever shaking your hand. Email is a far less threatening form of communication until they've decided they want to talk to you.[/tippy]

Click [here](#) for a template email to use when contacting your group members. You can find email templates catered to each week in the 'Before the Meeting' portion of each leader page.

**Call:** During the week leading up to your first meeting, call each group member to make sure they know the location and time of the first meeting (divide the list among leaders by gender). Make sure they have acquired their materials and know to read Chapter 1 and listen to the message. Encourage members who may be tentative; let them know you're excited about the group experience. [tippy title="Leader Tip!"]Again, do your best to put yourself in their shoes. You may be the friendliest person on earth and are certain they will love you once they have gotten to know you. That's the key; they still need to get to know you. Don't be surprised if you are talking to voicemail more often than not. Be prepared to share a brief encouragement letting them know you are here to help and you look forward to seeing them at the first meeting.[/tippy]

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

We must remember that, for our group members, taking a step to begin a Starting Point group is a very intimidating experience. For some, the reality of sitting in a group with a bunch of strangers talking about "religion" is beginning to sink in. They are insecure, unsure of what's about to happen, and on the brink of turning around and walking in the other direction. That is why it's imperative that we create a warm and hospitable environment for the first meeting.

As you prepare for your group to meet, remember the goal of the first week is to conduct the group in such a way that they come back for the discussion of Chapter 2. We must set the tone. Bring refreshments. Be creative. Consider these tips:

- **Circles are better than rows.** Whatever space you decide to meet in, make sure to arrange the chairs or couches in a circle. Avoid rows or any layout that feels like a classroom. You may even reconsider the room if it feels too large and dwarfs the group, or is surrounded by noise and/or distraction. A feeling of intimacy is key.
- **Provide snacks and drinks.** Don't go overboard; a simple tray of cookies, a bowl of fruit, and a carafe of coffee go a long way. In fact, you may want to offer a signup sheet for a different group member to bring snacks each week. Sharing this responsibility takes the burden off the leaders and gives group members a sense of ownership and accountability.
- **Be Present.** Show up early, turn off your cell phone during your meeting, and stay late. The best interaction with group members often takes place before or after the meeting.

## In-Between Group Meetings

Let's be honest. Leading an eight-week Starting Point group can be both exciting and daunting. At first, the new faces and the conversation energize us, but once the newness wears off and we settle into the routine, it's easy to coast. In order to avoid this, we must be intentional about the three primary responsibilities of every Starting Point leader. Remember, what happens during the group meeting is often not as significant as what happens in-between group

meetings.

- **Preparation:** Each week, *whether you are leading the discussion or not*, prepare for the group meeting by reading the chapter and visiting the Starting Point website. Make sure to listen to the corresponding media component and consult additional resources located on the Member and Leader pages online. Likewise, pray for your group and communicate with your co-leader(s) about facilitation roles. Give apprentice leaders ample opportunities to lead the group discussion, or even sections of a chapter, as they are ready. Provide feedback to one another as your group progresses.
- **Contact each group member every week:** You may want to wait until the first group meeting to see if particular leaders connect with specific group members. But after the first week, divide the list between co-leaders in the most feasible way and contact those under your care. Use a variety of methods—phone calls, texts, emails, note cards, sharing a meal, or meeting for coffee. Mix it up and be creative. The important thing is to let your group members know you care and want to help them in whatever way you can. Also, men should follow up with male group members and women with female group members to maintain wise boundaries.
- **Prioritize two social gatherings:** On the first day of your group, take a few minutes to plan a time when the majority of the group can connect outside of the official meetings. It's best to host one between the second and third group meetings so that the group can share their stories at the front end of their experience, and then have another social gathering close to the last group meeting to celebrate their journey. These can take place at a home, restaurant, or some other venue. These gatherings are extremely important for establishing relationships and community early.

## Sharing Stories

Brief introductions will take place the first week, but leaders and participants will each take an opportunity to share their own life stories. While this may feel intimidating at first, sharing life stories is extremely significant for several reasons:

- Sets the tone for a conversational environment at the beginning of the experience
- Realizes a deep-down desire to share our stories with someone else
- Creates authentic community quickly
- Helps group members become participants, not simply consumers
- Causes us to reflect on God's guiding presence in our lives

Each leader should share his or her story during the second group meeting. Be sure to model a seven-minute story to help set the expectation that storytelling can be both personal and brief at the same time. If you're worried about this, rehearse with a clock in hand. Also, feel free to share about your relationship with God as part of your life story, but don't overdo it or use the word "testimony." As leaders, we want to be sure not to communicate that a non-Christian doesn't have a life story. Having a limited amount of time in each group meeting means that *the rest of the stories should be shared during either your FIRST social gathering or during the first few minutes of each additional group meeting.*

At the first meeting, explain to the group that each person will have an opportunity to share their story and that the group leaders will model what a story looks like during the second group meeting. Then as you plan for a group social within the first couple of weeks, remind them that some, or all, will have an opportunity to share then. To help maintain confidentiality, any time group members will be sharing stories, please invite only the group members to that social gathering.

Informing them well ahead of time provides an opportunity for them to prepare and overcome their nervousness. Give people creative license to share their stories in whatever way they want (this will terrify some!). For those who are nervous or shy, you might help them get started by pointing them to the *Appendix: What's Your Story?* of their Conversation Guide. These pages ask a few basic questions to help them organize their thoughts about their life. For someone who hasn't spent time thinking about their story, this is a great resource to get them started. Please become familiar with this so you can help group members if needed.

Setting a time limit is critical. While seven minutes seems too brief for a life story, it's enough to whet the appetite. It also forces people to include the most important things. If your group is smaller, you can afford to go a little longer.

## Using the Leader Notes Each Week

Every group member and leader will utilize the same guide. However, we have produced Leader Notes that correspond to each chapter in the guide to assist you in facilitating the discussion each week. These notes are located on the Leader page of the Starting Point website and can be printed out or utilized on a tablet or smartphone. Each chapter contains these sections (though the first chapter is a bit unique):

- **Chapter Summary:** This is the summary win for the week as well as the Bottom Lines. Keep this information in mind as you pray, prepare, and guide discussion. These are the key concepts you want group members to explore.
- **Before The Meeting:** Outside of prayer and normal preparations, these are special considerations for each week.
- **Section One, Two, Three:** These sections will each include the wins and summary, as well as Expanded Leader Notes. In the Expanded Leader Notes, there are descriptions of each question and additional questions and resources.
- **Wrap-Up:** This offers suggestions for concluding the group meeting with final thoughts, Bottom Lines, prayer, and preparations for the next week.

Be flexible if you sense that the group needs to dwell on one part of the discussion a bit longer, even if that means you don't cover all of the material that week. Just be sure to hit the Bottom Lines before concluding the meeting time. These Leader Notes are provided as a road map for your meetings, but we encourage you to adapt the materials and questions to suit the needs of your group. It may be helpful to jot down your own thoughts and questions in your guide while

you prepare. When you do adapt the materials, use discernment and keep two things in mind: (1) the Bottom Lines of each chapter, and (2) the overall purpose of Starting Point: *a conversational environment where people can explore faith and experience community.*

## Adding Group Meetings

While the Starting Point experience is intentionally designed to last only eight weeks, there may be special circumstances that call for adding one or two meetings. For instance, if your discussion feels particularly unresolved one week, it may be appropriate to ask group members if they want to extend that theme an additional week. Or, after week eight, you might sense that the group still has questions. Thus, you could elect to add a ninth week. During this time, you should address lingering questions, celebrate what each participant has meant to the group and how he or she has grown, and talk about next steps. If you choose to add one or two weeks, be sure to ask for the group's input since they originally committed to only eight weeks. Also, make sure that the room/place where you meet is available for the extra week(s).

## Next Steps After Starting Point

Sustained life change happens best within the context of community. Starting Point provides a taste of community, but it is only eight weeks. The best chance for continued growth after a Starting Point experience is for members to:

1. **Join a small group.** Leaders should talk about community early and often in their groups so that members will be ready to take the next step when the group ends. Feel free to incorporate stories about your own small group throughout Starting Point, especially when you share your life story. Also, tell group members about different small groups that your church or organization offers and how they can get connected.
2. **Serve on a team.** We've all heard it said, "I went to serve, but I got so much in return." Whether the opportunity is to volunteer in your church, surrounding community, or traveling abroad, when we serve others we grow.

For North Point Ministries attendees, they may visit the [Starting Point](#) website for specific next steps.