

From First Date to Potential Mate:

By David Limiero

Understanding the Life Cycle of Your Small Group

Many writers have offered analogies for the stages of group formation, most choosing the individual human life cycle as a parallel. While this works adequately, it fails to capture and convey the relational emphasis so critical to small group life. The analogy I have chosen is one of courtship, marriage, and family development. Although not perfect, it does reflect the relational nature of groups, including the emotional content of many of the stages. The six stages and their lengths are as follows:

1. Cupid: Matchmaking (before the first group meeting)
2. Courtship: First Dates and Best Behavior (four-six weeks)
3. Conflict and Congruence: Can I reveal the real me? (four-six weeks)
4. Commitment: Engagement, Marriage, and Honeymoon (three-five weeks)
5. Cohesion, Contribution, and Childbearing: Learning and Working Together, Adding New Family Members (Up to thirty weeks)
6. Preparing to Release Adult Children: Children Leave to Start Their Own Families (the final six-eight weeks)

1. Cupid: Matchmaking

Groups, like dating relationships, can start spontaneously and coincidentally. But they are often best helped along by a Cupid, someone who can work with potential leaders and potential group members to find a good match. While the future leader is on the lookout for good prospects among friends and acquaintances, the Cupid (who may be a staff member or a ministry coach) can be more systematic in his or her search for a good match and can thus act as a catalyst for group formation.

The importance of advance preparation for a small group cannot be overemphasized. For those invited to attend, the first small group meeting is like a first date. The goal of the leader is to make the introduction to the group as little like a blind date as possible. Potential group members will want to know as much as possible about the purposes, goals, and other members of the group before they commit to the first meeting. Likewise, the new group leader needs to know as much as possible about his or her prospects.

Olsen emphasizes that groups do not start with a blank slate, but from an interaction of five things that the group members bring with them to the group: their personalities, their needs, their gifts, their histories, and their visions⁽ⁱ⁾ A clear group purpose needs to be expressed in the invitation to join, which becomes an implicit contract or covenant⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

Roberta Hestenes warns of two dangers if there is a failure at this stage. First, the group will struggle in its first weeks

and spend an inordinate amount of time deciding on its purpose. Second, the purpose it finally agrees upon will most likely be the lowest common denominator based on mutual agreement, not the one most conducive to discipleship and Christian formation.[\(iii\)](#)

The Cupid stage is a time of strong interaction between the small group leader and the matchmaker. The group leader and each of the group members bring their own perspectives to the group. Therefore, the purpose of the group must be clearly communicated to all involved. The goal of this stage is to make the first group meetings as little like a blind date as possible, moving the group quickly into the courtship stage.

2. Courtship: First Dates and Best Behaviour (four-six weeks)

As mentioned above, the first group meeting is a lot like a first date. Members come with a mixture of dread and anticipation. While a good Cupid stage will decrease these feelings, members may still feel unsure and dependent on the group leader. Even the words used by others to describe the first phase of a group are similar to the emotions experienced on a first date: sizing up, testing, ambiguity, reservation, discovery. Members' primary questions fall into two categories. The first is *inclusion*: Will I be accepted? Will I be liked? Who else is in the group? The second is *purpose*: What is expected of me? What are the rules? What is the group going to do? Group members may be hesitant to participate, or they may talk a lot.

In this phase there is a heavy dependence on the leader. Therefore, the leader's initiative is crucial. The members show far more concern and have many more questions about the role of the group leader than about the other members[\(iv\)](#). In response to the members' concerns, the leader needs to clarify the purpose of the group from the very first meeting. This is done through use of a covenant. As the members struggle with questions of inclusion, the leader also sets the tone and pace of self-disclosure, always telling his or her story first to set the depth level. History-giving is crucial in this phase if members are to overcome their reservations about the group. Self-disclosure continues as the leader allows and encourages each member to tell his or her story, providing positive feedback through affirmation. In this manner members discover the five items Olsen mentions--their personalities, their needs, their gifts, their histories, and their visions. The leader uses a variety of facilitative devices to help members share their story, thus reducing their anxiety and beginning to build trust.

At this stage, the group focuses almost exclusively on group-building (subjective content). Icebreaker activities, informal fellowship, and Relational Bible Study provide opportunities for non-threatening sharing. Prayers are simple or silent, so no one is forced to participate. Leaders should follow up on all group members with a personal contact every week in order to help members feel included. In the Courtship phase, the goal is relationship-building, not Bible study, mission, or worship.

If the leader has maintained high initiative, clarified the group purpose, modeled self-disclosure, and answered the members' primary questions, then at the end of this phase the members' feelings of anxiety and reservation will have faded. The anxiety of the first few dates will have quickly been replaced by the joy and excitement of a new romantic relationship. If self-disclosure has been met by affirmation and members have been able to share their stories, they should feel comfortable being a part of the group — comfortable enough to disagree.

3. Conflict and Congruence: Can I reveal the real me? (four-six weeks)

There comes a point in most dating relationships when the couple stops putting forth their best impression and the two begin to reveal themselves more honestly. This begins a new stage of testing — testing the compatibility of ideas and values, and exploring the possibilities for long-term commitment. A similar situation occurs in the group process. Two new issues begin in this stage: conflict and differentiation. Members are more willing to test out their real opinions in front of the group to see how the group will react. Conflict may come as the result of disagreements. There may also be a leadership conflict as members struggle to differentiate themselves and find their own purpose and role within the group. The conflict may not be open. Hestenes says it is usually subtle, and can be seen in silence-talkativeness and dominance-deference issues.[\(v\)](#)

The leader needs to be sensitive to group process and communication patterns, especially non-verbal patterns. If there is a leadership struggle, he/she must be careful not to tighten control. Conflict between members must be worked out and handled appropriately, with an equal concern for maintaining viewpoints and relationships. Neighbour suggests that the leader direct the group toward worship, to change the relational focus from man-to-man to man-to-God[\(vi\)](#) The leader may also want to assign responsibilities to group members as they differentiate themselves (e.g., worship leader, prayer leader).

Group building is still the focus in this stage, although worship begins to increase in importance. Conflict is a natural and healthy part of the group building process (within limits), especially as members become more comfortable with each other and risk sharing their own views.

The end of this stage marks the beginning of group ownership. "The" group becomes "our" group. Later it will become "my" group.[\(vii\)](#) The group is now ready to move beyond Relational Bible Study and begin a more inductive approach to the Scriptures. The prayer life will deepen as real issues are discussed more readily. In short, the group is now ready for more serious commitment — to nurture, to community, to worship, and to mission.

4. Commitment: Engagement, Marriage, and Honeymoon (three-five weeks)

In our culture, engagement often marks the beginning of the formal commitment period in a relationship. It is a time of celebration and commitment to the longevity of the relationship. It is also a time of planning and goal-setting, with many issues to decide: details of the wedding, the honeymoon, and the future home together. A similar stage exists in the life of the group. The names others have assigned to this stage reveal the underlying dynamics: ownership, interdependence, trust, investment, and work. Members have been together for many weeks, have resolved conflicts, and have strengthened the bonds which hold them together. Dependence on the leader has been replaced with dependence on other members.[\(viii\)](#) Members are willing to confess their own weaknesses and to be direct in confronting others.[\(ix\)](#) There may still be conflict, but there is a corresponding commitment to solve problems and to maintain group relationships.[\(x\)](#) Group roles have developed, and each member has his or her niche within the group. The theological goal of koinonia has been achieved. The group is now ready for a well-deserved honeymoon celebration.

This is also the point in group life for a re-covenanting process. The formal covenant of the marriage ceremony is

mirrored in the new group covenant. It is a new time of planning and decision-making for life together. The group leader needs to facilitate this process, but by this point the group has taken ownership and begun to develop shared leadership. Now is the time for an apprentice leader to be selected. Group goals should be comprehensive, involving the four areas of worship, support, bible study, and mission. In each of these areas the group should strive for greater depth. Once the group has celebrated and these goals have been set, they are ready to implement these goals in the life of the group. They are ready to move beyond commitment to contribution.

5. Contribution: Learning and Working Together, Adding New Family Members (Up to 30 weeks)

All of the planning and hard work of the engagement period is over. The couple has publicly declared their fidelity to one another and to God. They have left the wedding reception and enjoyed a honeymoon together. But now the honeymoon is over. The couple moves on to a new phase in their life, learning to live and work together as newlyweds. They must tend to the daily responsibilities of career or school, maintaining a household, and developing new relationships with others.

The parallel stage of group life, contribution, is also called functioning, performing, maturity, action, and outreach. The primary focus of the group is no longer group-building, but bible study and mission. Shared leadership should be practiced--an apprentice leader should take on increasing responsibility within the group, under the careful supervision of the leader. Leadership may also be rotated among group members and the group may meet in different homes.

Deeper bible study and worship will come easily in this stage. This stage is a good time to introduce new and different methods of study, prayer, and spiritual disciplines into the life of the group. Bible study should also be more holistic, focusing on six life areas: volitional, vocational, emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual^(xi). This is often the time of greatest spiritual growth for group members as they are challenged to grow and change within the context of accountability and support from their fellow group members.

The danger in this stage is that group members will engage in "navel-gazing," and fail to reach out to include new people in the group.^(xii) Outreach goals should have been set during the commitment phase; however, they will need to be followed up here. The key word is accountability. This phase is the best time in the life of the group to include new people, because the quality of group life is so strong, but the introduction of newcomers will affect the depth of self-disclosure in the group as new members are sized up, just as new children affect an existing marriage relationship. Newcomers are made to feel welcome as members' stories are shared again, and the newcomer's story is heard for the first time. Relational disruption will be lessened if newcomers share existing relationships with a group member^(xiii). Because other members' needs for inclusion have already been satisfied, they can now focus on helping newcomers feel included.

This will be the longest stage. The church leadership, however, will want to limit the life of the group and provide a definite time of termination. This is especially important as groups grow to the size where they are no longer small groups (about 15), or where they fail to reach out to newcomers and instead engage in navel gazing.

6. Preparing to Release Adult Children: Children Leave to Start Their Own Families (The final 6-8 weeks)

One goal of parenting is to raise the children to be self-sufficient. As children grow and mature, they are given increasing responsibilities. When they reach adulthood, they venture off on their own. Many to begin their own families. As they begin new families, the years of modeling from their own parents is likely to be reflected in their own parenting styles. Their parents will continue to have a relationship with their now-grown children, but it will differ significantly from their earlier years.

At the end of this phase, the successful group will multiply by sending out designated leaders, becoming two new groups in order to better enter the world. New groups are the best place for new people to find the answer to their search for community. The rebirth of relationships in a new group is a wonderful context for those in need of spiritual rebirth. Unless a group multiplies, such a new birth will not be possible.

Much valuable preparation takes place in this final phase. The leader or apprentice leader prepares to lead one of the new groups. The group gathers to commission their new leaders, laying hands on them and sending them off as missionaries to a world in need of Christ. Members discover their own spiritual gifts and passions as they move out into this new mission thrust. The focus of the old group turns to the releasing process and the care and nurture of the new group's first weeks together.

However, many groups will never send out leaders and multiply. These groups must instead go through a process of termination as their life cycle draws to a close. During this phase, members must go through the grief process. In many ways, the old group is dying. The deep relationships developed in group life will soon be radically changed as the old group comes to an end. But unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it will not bear much fruit (John 12:24). The death of a group is a necessary process. As McBride comments, it can come either by design or default^(xiv). A positive group experience is much more likely if death comes by design.

In this final phase of group life, the leader again takes the initiative. Many in the group will not want to face its death, and must be helped through the grief process. The leader strives to refocus the grief process into celebration and commemoration. Even when a group multiplies at the end of its life, its members must go through the grief process. Old relationships must be celebrated and commemorated before the children are sent out into the world. The leader's responsibility is twofold: he/she must help members say goodbye adequately, and he/she must oversee the sending out of the new leaders. To this end, many groups plan for a graduation ceremony from the group. This is a deliberate time of commencement and celebration of new beginnings.

Of course, the death of an old group or the sending out of leaders to form a new one does not mean that relationships must end. Just as parents maintain a relationship with their adult children, so the old group maintains a relationship with the members of the new group. In fact, the old group members should meet monthly for several months for reunions and celebration of their life together. In this way they can serve as a support group for one another, maintaining old relationships even as new ones are created. As group members rediscover Christian community in their new groups, a support system is no longer necessary. Two new, healthy groups have now formed, ready to repeat the

cycle as they draw new people into Christ's loving body, and to continue to make disciples as they prepare for his return.

Notes:

1. Charles M. Olson, *Cultivating Religious Growth Groups* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984), 39.
2. Olsen, *Cultivating Religious Growth Groups*, 44.
3. Roberta Hestenes, *Using the Bible in Groups* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), 31.
4. Clyde Reid, *Groups Alive--Church Alive: The Effective Use of Small Groups in the Local Church* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1969), 28.
5. Hestenes, *Using the Bible in Groups*, 32.
6. Ralph W. Neighbor, Jr. and Lorna Jenkins, *Where Do We Go From Here?: A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, Inc., 1990), 46.
7. Neil F. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1990), 232.
8. David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 364.
9. Richard Hester, "Remembering: The Past in the Present", in *On Becoming a Group*, ed. John Hendrix (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, n.d.), 29.
10. Hestenes, *Using the Bible in Groups*, 33.
11. Lyman Coleman, *Serendipity Training Manual for Groups* (Littleton, CO: Serendipity House, 1987), 28.
12. Neighbor, *Where do We Go From Here?*, 232.
13. Newcomers to the group should be those who have some existing relationships with a group member, rather than those assigned to the group by the church hierarchy. Group members should be consciously initiating relationships and inviting others to attend. These one-on-one relationships help newcomers feel more comfortable and involved. See the discussion on relational evangelism earlier in this thesis.
14. McBride, *How to Lead Small Groups*, 51.

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