

Lessons learned while leading a long-running neighborhood Bible study

By Raelene Williams. Raelene has been leading Bible studies with individuals and small groups for more than 40 years. This paper is based on a talk she presented at a workshop for potential small-group leaders, at Los Gatos Christian Church, in Los Gatos, CA.

In 1973 my husband Gary and I moved from Santa Clara, California, to a new home in San Jose's Almaden Valley. It was only a move of a few miles, but it took us into a neighborhood full of young families, and to a new church. Gary and I both promised the Lord that our new house would be used for Him, but it took two years before we began to see what that might look like. It was then that the Lord decided our neighborhood needed a women's Bible study and I should be the leader. I was in my mid-twenties at the time, had one toddler, a baby on the way, and no experience leading Bible studies. I say "the Lord decided," because it was definitely not my idea to start a study in our home.

God spoke to me through one specific neighbor. She bothered me for six months with questions about faith and her problems with finding fellowship with Christians. Her main obstacle was that her husband was not a Christian and didn't like her to be gone on Sundays. I mentioned that a Bible study would be good for her if she could find one. She asked me if I had ever thought of leading a study. She was certain that a few of our friends in the neighborhood would be interested, although no one had ever said anything directly to either of us.

Right away the Lord started working on me! But I had all kinds of negative answers for Him:

- I had only been involved in three Bible studies before this and they had all been with committed Christians
- I had no teaching experience
- I had no idea what to study, how to prepare, or how to share the material
- Although I had been involved in church from childhood, I had only been a committed Christian for about three years.

I knew that I didn't have the experience of a long-term relationship with the Lord, but I also knew the power available to me through Christ. I decided to claim His promise in Philippians 4:13, where Paul writes: *"I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me."*

Gradually, I began to see that the one stumbling block to my saying yes to the Lord was my lack of knowledge about curriculum. I didn't know where to begin, so decided to ask our minister, Willard Black, for help. He was an expert in the field of small group Bible studies and was in the process of forming a new ministry that would present workshops on that topic and others. What a "coincidence" that our move to Almaden Valley had put us within 10 minutes of the church he pastored.

After considering the backgrounds of the neighbors who planned to attend, Willard and I decided that the Gospel of John would be the best place to start. It presents an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus, who most of the neighbors did not know much about. Willard gave me the names of three good commentaries on the book and spent about four hours with me as we read through the Gospel of John together.

If you are thinking about starting a small-group study of your own for the first time, by all means ask for help from a pastor who is an experienced small-group leader or advice from a Christian brother or sister who knows scripture and is willing to share that knowledge with you.

We talked about the over-all meaning of the Gospel, as well as the most important chapters and what principles to stress. He also promised to be available for advice as the study progressed.

While I was preparing to start our neighborhood study, the Lord was busy in the lives of several women who lived near us. When I held our first meeting, seven showed up. Their spiritual backgrounds were varied: One Jew, one Catholic turned Lutheran, one agnostic, one with no religious background but with an interest in Christianity, and two Christians looking for encouragement to be more committed to their faith, plus one first-time leader.

Each person had a different reason for coming. The Catholic thought of me as a fundamentalist and wanted to see what I believed. The agnostic was new in the neighborhood and came to meet people. My Jewish friend knew nothing about the Bible. She thought the Old and New Testaments were about the same and that we were going to study some Old Testament scripture. With backgrounds as varied as these you can imagine what a wild time we had during our study time.

I prepared for three to five hours before each weekly meeting. During the preparation time I read through the text a few times (using different translations) and read through the three commentaries.

After this I would write a synthesis of the reference material. After studying my notes, I picked out the key verses and looked for daily applications of the principles being taught by the text. I worked these daily application ideas into questions and noted the answers given in the scriptures. I used these as discussion questions when we met. Our study did not progress verse by verse, but by the main principles being taught.

In the beginning, we started our study time with coffee and a light snack, and spent about 15 to 20 minutes sharing what was happening in our lives. Then our study began. In the early days, I rarely opened with prayer, but as time progressed I worked it in. For a long time, I was the only one who prayed; I did not want to do anything to put anyone on the spot, especially given our varied faith backgrounds.

Many days we never made it through a chapter. Everyone had questions. Some were very basic; some more involved. As I prepared each lesson I tried to anticipate their questions so I could be ready with scriptures that spoke to them. When I didn't know the answer to a question I told them I didn't know, but would research the answer and have it the following week. If a question stumped me completely, I simply stated that I was still learning and didn't know. I learned very early that I was Christian Exhibit A.

The women were constantly asking me how I handled my life in relationship to what Christ taught. I had to rely totally on the Lord for my answers to their questions and for Him to reveal areas for change in my life, since they were examining it so closely.

One of the most important things that the Lord taught me during this time was to keep my mouth shut; not to comment when someone was off base on the application of a scriptural principle taught by Jesus, but to let the Holy Spirit work. Often the Spirit chose to work through another person in the group or through a scripture later on in the text. This principle was repeated in the actions of the entire study group, thus freeing everyone to share the most simple or most off-the-wall questions without fearing embarrassment.

Realizing I was about their only example of a committed Christian, I tried to get to know each of them individually, apart from our small group. A few of us got together so that our children could play (We all had children between the ages of two and four). I was careful to rely on the Lord to guide during these times. We rarely talked about spiritual things unless someone other than me brought them up. I was thankful to see that the Lord wanted them to know me as a regular person and not just as their study leader.

By the time we had been together for about three months I was about drained and we had not yet finished our study of the Gospel of John. Everyone had so many questions and I, as their personal friend, didn't feel I could answer some as directly as seemed appropriate. I just wasn't comfortable saying something like, "Yes, Linda, a Christian would not do that and you should change your behavior." I saw these women in my neighborhood regularly and wanted their friendship.

Willard offered me a solution. He came to teach Acts for six weeks. He became their answer man and they flooded him with questions. He was also able to answer their questions about the life-changing principles taught in Acts with direct answers. They appreciated his honesty. If you are in an evangelistic Bible study and it is not as exciting as it used to be, it might help to bring in a carefully selected special speaker for four to six weeks. The break is likely to benefit the group and the leader. I know for me, it was a time to gain a fresh perspective, allowing me to see the members as one of them, rather than as their teacher.

While we appreciated and benefited from our guest leader, by the time we finished our six weeks in Acts all of the study members were eager to return to our original small group. We took a four-week Christmas vacation, and then finished our study of the Gospel of John. After that we took a summer break. We found that regular vacation times from Bible study were important for us. Also, it was hard to find someone willing to watch 10 to 12 children under the age of seven.

Besides regular study times, we liked to schedule informal group gatherings. We found that if we made time to know one another outside of Bible study we were able to settle down to the study faster on the days we met.

At this point, you may be wondering how, or if, this study affected the lives of our members. At first, changes were slow in coming, but things started moving after Willard's six weeks on Acts. Our Lutheran member and her husband were baptized. The agnostic accepted the Lord and was baptized, and several months later both my Jewish friend and her husband were baptized and placed their membership at a local non-denominational Christian church.

By the end of the first year, we had all come a long way from where we were when we began the group, but the change that I saw the most was in me. Through the intensive Bible study I did in preparation for leading the group, and the close relationship that I developed with the Lord, I grew in faith and understanding.

When fall came I knew that finding preparation time was going to be difficult. I now had a three-year-old and a new baby. The group decided to help me by using a commercially available recorded discussion series. It took the burden off of me and everyone enjoyed the new style. If you consider using an audio-video series for a small group study, don't be concerned about not agreeing totally with everything the speakers say. Disagreement can lead to good, healthy discussion and scripture searching to see how the speakers support their positions. My caution is that the leader should screen the material ahead of time, remembering the backgrounds of the people attending the study and where they are spiritually.

As with our guest speaker, when the recorded series was over, we were all eager to get back to God's word. I asked Willard to come back in the spring and lead us through Ephesians. He planned on staying about four weeks and ended up spending two months. By now our group was so comfortable with each other that we could really minister to each other's needs. Willard had been a widower for about six months and benefitted from our fellowship as much as we did from his teaching. (If you're looking for a small group leader, consider asking a pastor, a church elder or a retired friend who has experience leading small-group discussions).

The makeup of the group had changed by now, too. The original core was me and two other women, but some neighbors had moved and we had added four new members. The one thing that each new member mentioned when joining us was how much at home she felt. I think that falls back on our decision to watch our tongues and let the Holy Spirit work in each other's lives.

Through the following years we studied many different books. I consulted Willard at times and also asked the group for suggestions. We've discussed our way through Philippians, Romans, James, and the Gospel of Mark. Not every

subject was well received. When we decided to study James, I was excited. It's one of my favorite books. Unfortunately, I think the subject matter stepped on too many sore toes. James has a way of coming right to the point. Even though some of us had been studying the Bible together for four years, several were not able to handle James' directives, especially not while others were watching and listening.

Another curriculum disaster was entirely my mistake. We all wanted a good teaching series or discussion course on women's roles from a biblical perspective, and one of our group found a guide she thought would work. I skimmed the book and learned the hard way that as a teacher I still needed to evaluate our materials more thoroughly in light of where the group's member were coming from. We ended up having a lot of good discussion, but only because I took the time to bring in two or three other sources that had different views than our study guide. We dropped that study quickly and went on to a more fruitful topic.

Year four was a real turning point for our study. We started the year by having more prayer time. Some of the women are still uncomfortable with prayer in the group. I remained the one responsible for prayer times, although we tried conversational prayer at times (giving everyone an opportunity to speak brief sentence prayers if they wanted, longer prayers if they felt so led, or to remain silent). I kept a list of prayer requests each week and a log of answers. We tried partnering women to pray for and with each other, and that worked for a while. We also had a continuous prayer chain for the 18-month-old daughter of one of our members when the baby had open heart surgery. Prayer, by this time, had become an important aspect in the growth of each member.

By year four we began to share the leadership of the group. The shared teaching was not my idea, but I was thankful that a member presented the idea and it was approved by everyone. Our group decided it would be best if I kept the discussion rolling by getting everyone back on track if the study strayed and the current week's leader needed help. It's essential to give one person responsibility for keeping a study moving, but I found this to be one of the most uncomfortable and difficult things I was asked to do. Balancing respect for the rotating discussion leaders with the need to stay on subject was really difficult.

Putting together this talk enabled me to see very clearly how our Bible study changed in focus from one designed for evangelism to one that promoted spiritual growth. If you've been involved in a study for a few months, it might be helpful to discuss how everyone is doing and make sure the format and curriculum are still appropriate for your group.

As for our small group, we eventually sold the Almaden house and moved back to Santa Clara, to be closer to our family-owned business. But we have never ceased to be involved in Bible-oriented small groups for very long. Some of our best have been composed of my husband and me and one other couple. We've also participated in, and led, groups of men and women, men only, women only, groups with set starting and ending dates (four weeks, eight weeks, etc.), and open-ended groups that ran for a year or two. We've had studies at work (though that's hard to do in many companies these days), studies on week nights, studies early on weekday mornings, and studies on weekends.

The main thing we learned is that it's important to have a topic that suits the group, a leader who is sensitive to the needs of those who attend and who is willing to do the work of preparing, and a place to meet, preferably the same place each time.

We're in a small-group currently that has been running for several years. We meet in the same house, unless our hosts are going to be away; at the same time and on the same day; and we begin by sharing a pot-luck meal. One of the group serves as our volunteer coordinator, making sure everyone knows if the meeting schedule is changed, communicating any group-related business, and keeping track of who will be leading the discussion each week. We like to rotate this role around the group, to those who are willing to volunteer. As for what we study, we are now discussing key points from the previous week's sermon. While this format works for us, it's only one of many ways to have a great small-group experience. What works for another group may be entirely different. The only way to find out is to bring some people together and get started.