

Developing a SOAR Study

“You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1)

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE

Over the next five sessions you will learn how to do the practical work of preparing and leading a GROWTH Group meeting. It is within these meetings that members learn to apply truth to life; discussing; at times deliberating; and often developing as the transformative combination of truth, grace and community create a melting pot of change.

*You have to put the
hay where the horses
can eat it*

As the designated leader of the group, ultimately it is your responsibility to guide the members of the group through the stages of groups life, and much of that navigation is done in the group meetings themselves. The skill of conducting great meetings is one that combines many factors, none of them overwhelming in themselves, yet all significant in their application.

In this session we will equip you to prepare a study based on scripture which will both inform and empower those in the meeting. We have placed this lesson at the beginning of the week because over the next five days you will use the concepts within this session to prepare a short study which you will deliver at one of the upcoming workshops. To help you with this process, we have supplied a guide (*Appendix 9: Preparing a Bible Study*) which you can use to record your notes and questions.

Before commencing the process of putting together a study, it is beneficial to remind yourself of exactly who will be in the room when it is delivered. Author John Ortberg coined the helpful phrase *“You have to put the hay where the horses can eat it”*. He was making the point that truth is always wonderful, but it isn't transformational until it can be grasped, understood and applied. Likewise, if the group is one that learns best through visual, auditory or experiential means, then some forethought must go into determining how to present the truth in ways it can be most effectively absorbed by them. In this regard you may need to consider the use of DVD teachings, music, practical exercises or conventional spoken methods in the delivery of the study.

1) TEACHING GOAL

One of the most challenging yet beneficial facets of study preparation is the task of defining the goal of the teaching. Preferably, you should be able define that goal in one sentence. It may be something like: *“To have the group internalise the value of people so they will be motivated to reach out”*, or; *“To understand and apply God's forgiveness”*. Note that *“Filling up the teaching time”* is not really an acceptable goal! The goal should have an element of measurable transformation attached to it, whether the change is in belief, character or action.

The key to setting a goal that is more than just a random line in the sand is to apply SERVE skill number one: *See Ahead* to a preferred future. More than anyone else in the group, the leader will be aware of how the group is positioned along the stages of group development continuum (Refer Notes From the previous workshop session). That will assist you in determining whether the group is more in need of learning aimed at belief, practice, outreach, community or spiritual development.

In the absence of some strategic initiative on the leader's part (albeit clothed in a degree of consultation) the group can quickly descend into a situation we might call Curriculum Gridlock. This often appears when someone in the group asks: *“What should we study next?”*. As innocent as that question can be, it opens the door for each person to passionately suggest a theme of interest that suits their current phase of curiosity. A no-win situation then results since the potential denial of a request will bring tension, especially if you have no real reason to not comply, or if you do comply then the study series will potentially serve no strategic purpose for the overall direction of the group. If that logic sounds harsh, consider the consequences of what is not being accomplished for the kingdom because just one group of people have bogged down in admirable, but probably unproductive material. Romans 12:8 states that if we are leaders, we are to lead diligently. That needn't be onerous responsibility, but it will require us to be intentional. Where possible we are to facilitate the journey of the group towards multiplication.

Therefore, when considering which material to use for your study material, always take the time to dwell on where the group is at, where they are to be going, and what steps might help to bridge that gap. Then you can articulate your goal by answering two questions: 1) What would you like the group to do or change?; and 2) Why?

At times you will simply use externally produced material for your study component, however there will certainly be seasons where you will require some personally developed, Bible-based studies that reflect what you believe to be God's reasonable direction for the group. To aid you that process we suggest you use a tool called SOAR (yes, another acronym!) to guide you in forming a scripturally sound study session.

2) SCRIPTURE

Once you have determined the goal of your teaching, select a scripture passage that addresses the issue at hand. Where possible select a passage rather than an isolated verse which can easily be taken out of context and/or applied incorrectly. When selecting a passage, be aware of the types of passages within scripture, as well as the types of applications.

Types of Passages: Within the Bible there are various categories of texts, varying from: apocalyptic, prophetic, allegorical, literal, doctrinal, historical, poetic and so on. Some passages contain explicit commands, others do not, yet reveal information about the heart of God and His dealings with humanity.

Types of Applications: Bible texts were written to achieve different aims at differing stages of history. For our purposes, some have one or both of the following uses:

Belief Applications: which directly or indirectly address theology and doctrine, helping us to form belief and correct error.

Behaviour Applications: which help us to address attitudes, values and practices.

Spiritual Applications: These are texts which, if applied under the Spirit's guidance, might form God's specific will or word in a situation or condition. Special care is needed here not use a text in a way that counters its original meaning.

Perhaps the most important skill to develop when applying scripture is *exegesis*. This practice examines the context of the scripture; notes who it was written to and why; determines what it meant to the recipients; and then finds application in the current context whilst remaining true to the original intent of the passage. The type of background information required can be often found in modern Study Bibles, Commentaries or Bible Dictionaries. For suggestion on further resources, contact your minister.

3) OBSERVATION

Once the correct meaning and use of the text is determined, you can work within that framework to ascertain the central truth of the scripture. In many instances there will also be supporting truths in the passage which apply to other relevant areas. As one who has in mind the original Teaching Goal, your efforts will be directed at finding what the passage might mean to your group today.

You may have selected this passage because it will potentially correct misconceptions held by some members, or else challenge sinful or neglectful practices. As such you may have to take pains to present the truths within in such a way as to offer truth and life, rather than merely offering a public rebuke which often fails to take hold due to offence. Remember, "*we must put the hay where the horses can eat it*", and even though most of us require correction from time to time, a teacher's skill often finds ways to have the person feel like they discovered the error (and the path out of it) themselves.

Often the best way to foster the group's ability to observe the central and supporting truths of the text is to practice the art of asking the right questions. Whilst a good practice is to only ask questions to which you already know the answer, at times we need to ask leading questions that encourage discovery.

Scripture
Observation
Application
Response

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For example, the leader might say “*This passage seems quite direct, why do you think a writer who so obviously wants the best for the recipients be so strong on this issue?*”. Note a few things about that question:

- 1) **It is an open question.** Avoid asking questions that can be ignored or given a yes/no answer.
- 2) **It requires them to enter the situation and determine what is happening.** This keeps the discussion within the scope of the original meeting.
- 3) **It is non-accusatory.** The question incites empathy more than defensiveness, and also presents the author as the one doing the correcting, rather than the group leader.
- 4) **It infers a positive, life-giving motive.** The question assumes that the author, and therefore probably God, is offering an embracing and positive offer of a better way.

Use questions to your advantage. Often people learn the most effectively when they feel they have discovered the answers themselves. Use questions throughout the study to summarise discussion, ascertain the meaning of texts, discover diverse applications and foster inter-active learning.

4) APPLICATION

Group environments create a wonderful opportunity to discuss truth in such a way as to apply it to life. Again, intentional use of leading questions as to the ramifications of the scriptures on our daily choices and attitudes can produce defining moments in people’s lives. If practical, consider using various methods of learning such as having smaller break-out groups of two or three discuss a point and return with answers. Use brainstorming techniques to get people’s thoughts in the open, and then have the group agree on the best outcome. Your previously determined teaching goal begins to find its fruition in this section of the meeting where people consider their life in comparison with what they agree to be truth.

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5) RESPONSE

One of the Apostle Paul’s common questions was “*What then shall we say in response to this?*”¹. In keeping with his legal mind, Paul’s leading question was aimed at guiding a response. Hopefully, the group can initiate their own heart-felt response to transformative learning, even if it requires a little guiding by the leader. Individual’s may also have their own response as it applies to their situation, and in the safe setting of the group you may want to have the members respond in ways that confirm a change in belief. This may include a time of rededication or repentance, a choice to do or be something different, or a time when group members can gather around someone needing support.

Scripture
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Obviously, the intent will be that the response of the group is in line with the original teaching goal. At times you may sense the mark was missed totally as God seemed to have other plans for the evening, but of course that is an even better result.

6) SUMMARY

As appropriate, develop a concise summary for the study that encapsulates the teaching and response. Some teachers adhere to creating a “*phrase that pays*”, a short sentence that encapsulates the intent of the study. Whatever the method, try and have the members leave with the crucial truths in their hearts.

NOTES:

- 1) Romans 4:1, 6:1, 7:7, 8:31, 9:14, 9:30, 1 Corinthians 14:26