

## COMMON COURTESIES

### SETTING GROUND RULES WITH YOUR SMALL GROUP

It's your first night with your new small group. Everyone is getting along wonderfully, the discussion is moving at a good pace, and the level of sharing is deeper than you'd expected....

Then, just as everyone is quieting down for a time of reflection and prayer, it happens. Someone's cell phone rings. The person with the phone looks around guiltily. One person giggles. Another shoots an angry look. The phone keeps ringing, until the person quickly steps outside to answer it. But now the momentum is disrupted. Others are annoyed or distracted, while you're left asking yourself, "How could we have avoided this?"

The simple answer: Ground rules. Every group needs a few guidelines that everyone can agree upon. This helps people know what to expect from others, and what others will be expecting of them. It also promotes give-and-take interaction, and encourages a sense of equality among group members, so no one person becomes more or less important than another.

Of course, if you go into a group and announce, "Here are the rules!" others might feel a bit put off. Instead, take the approach of having your group work together to establish a few simple ground rules. It can be your first project together as a group, and will help everyone have a feeling of ownership in the group.

At your first meeting (or as soon as possible, if you've already begun your group), ask everyone to suggest one guideline. You can do this out loud and write suggestions on newsprint. Or, have everyone write one or two thoughts on index cards, then collect them and read them aloud (to avoid embarrassing those not quite ready to share). Either way, gather your suggestions, let others give input, and decide on just a few that everyone can agree upon. You don't have to have a long list, but be sure the concerns of the group are addressed by those you settle upon.

Here are a few basic ground rules you might consider:

- **Confidentiality.** It's not just for Las Vegas. What's said at group stays at group. No one wants to find out he or she has been the subject of gossip or well-meaning "prayer discussions." This is probably the most important ground rule of all.
- **Start on time—and end on time.** It will be up to you as the leader to guide the group in sticking with this commitment. It's especially helpful to those who have children at home with babysitters, and those with work schedules that are affected by late nights or meetings that run over.
- **Discussion involves everyone.** To make this work everyone needs to participate as a listener and as a speaker. It should be understood that when one person is monopolizing the discussion, the leader could say, "Let's hear from someone else now." And when another person has listened for a long time, the leader might ask, "Jennie, do you have any input you'd like to share?"
- **Remember your manners.** Avoid dismissing the thoughts of others, don't laugh at others when they've shared (unless they've just told a joke), and no putdowns of any kind. These are the actions that make others "shut down" and feel uneasy about sharing. Opening up can be hard enough for some people as it is. Your group should be a welcoming place for all.
- **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's just a fact of life that everyone has different opinions. If the group has differing thoughts on an issue, there's no requirement that everyone agree. After a reasonable time of discussion, the leader or another group member could state that it's time to leave this point unresolved and move on to another discussion question or activity. No one should have his or her feelings hurt if others don't share all the same opinions.
- **And perhaps one last suggestion...** Turn off cell phones before group begins!