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*Seeker Small Groups*

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# Catch the Vision



*I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.*

EZEKIEL 34:16

*You've never looked into the eyes of another human being who doesn't matter to God.*

BILL HYBELS

I locked eyes with the guy walking toward me on the third floor of Indiana University's Read Dorm, reached out my hand, and greeted him cordially. The instant he introduced himself, I recognized his name. "No way. You're not *the* Steve, the one who wrote all those letters last year, are you?"

"Yep, that would be me — I'm *the* Steve."

"Really? Wow! It's awesome to finally meet you."

Steve Parker had spent the previous year as a foreign exchange student in Spain. Almost every month he had written long letters back to his friends in the dorm, graphically describing all his wild escapades. He spared no details. The arrival of his legendary letters turned into a little ritual; the guys would gather around and read every word out loud, then march out into the hallway to post them on the bulletin board for everyone else to enjoy. They'd shout, "Hey, everybody, look at what Steve's up to now!" His stories always made for a great laugh.

So, from a distance, I felt I had already gotten to know this guy named Steve. From his monthly updates I knew how wild and crazy he was and how easily he could turn any situation into a good time. He was quite the popular guy, and everybody eagerly anticipated his return.

This year Steve and I were living on the same dorm floor, enabling me to finally meet him in person. The guy I had read so much about was now standing right before me — and I was looking dead center into the eyes of someone who mattered deeply to God.

“Steve, do you have any idea what a hit your letters were last year? You certainly had a blast in Spain. You’ve got quite a reputation around here — everyone thinks you’re some kind of a hero!” Then, to my surprise, I took a risk and heard myself say, “Steve, this might seem a little off the wall, but I’m starting up a Bible discussion group with some of the guys here on the floor. We’re going to talk about what we think about God and Christianity and stuff like that, and I’d like you to come. What do you think? Would you be willing to check it out?”

“Did you not pay any attention to my letters?” Steve taunted. “I’m not interested in the Bible. I’m not interested in God. I’m not interested in Christianity. And I’m *definitely* not interested in your Bible study. Are you crazy?”

I half laughed and agreed that maybe it was a wild idea. But I wanted to leave the door open, so I assured him that the invitation was always there if he ever changed his mind. Secretly I prayed that maybe, just maybe, he would somehow give it a shot. “Forget about it; I won’t be there,” Steve assured me. His good-natured, though pointed, response didn’t discourage me. In fact, I was determined to build a solid friendship with him anyway, just as I intended to do with some of the guys who had accepted my invitation.

The year before, I hadn’t intentionally planned my first seeker small group experience — it just came together by accident. Nevertheless, God used it in the lives of some of the seekers there. This time, however, I purposefully set out to lead a small group of non-Christians. I didn’t want this year’s group to come together by chance; I wanted to make good and sure it happened.

So during the first week of the semester, I introduced myself to the guys on the floor and let them know I was going to start up a weekly Bible study to talk about spiritual things. I invited almost everyone I met, and most of them said, “No thanks; I’m not interested.”

I dared them, anyway, to come just one time to check it out and see what they thought. Several expressed interest and said

they'd drop in to give it a try, but only five or six guys actually showed up for the first meeting. To my surprise, though, more and more of them showed up in the coming weeks. And the group proved to be very popular, because we not only openly discussed questions and objections everyone had about Christianity and the Bible, but in the process we began to develop some deep and meaningful friendships.

Even though Steve didn't show any initial interest in joining us, he and I continued to hang out together and our friendship grew. And then he totally caught me off guard one day by announcing that he planned to check out the Bible study group after all. "You know, for the past month I've been hearing all about your group and everyone says it's a good time," he said. "So I'm going to come to your next meeting and experience it for myself."

I was thrilled, but I couldn't pass up the chance to use a little reverse psychology — and to give him a hard time. "No way, Steve," I said. "It's too late. You can't come to our group. You've been banned."

"No, really, I'm going to be there. The guys say it's fascinating because you're open to getting different points of view. So I'm bringing my perspective on things."

"Is that right? Okay, Steve, try and join us if you're that curious. Maybe, if you're lucky, we'll let you in."

The very next week he was there! Steve's energy infused new life into our group's discussion. He didn't hold anything back. He didn't hesitate for one minute in asking tough questions, voicing his opinions, or sharing his past experiences. He also added fuel to the fire by raising issues and questions that some of the others either hadn't thought of yet or didn't know exactly how to express. So when Steve expressed some opposing viewpoints, they'd say, "Yeah, that's a good one; what about that?" Sparks flew with Steve in the group, and I was glad to have him there.

It really didn't surprise me when Steve returned the next week for round two. But when he came back the following week and the one after that, I was astounded. Although he was there to contribute his perspective, he began to learn a few spiritual truths along the way. Eventually he bought himself a Bible and began reading it for the first time in his life!

I have lingering memories of Steve's growing spiritual hunger and his quest to satisfy it. He was fervently trying to figure out what the Bible was all about and what it could mean to know God in a deeper way. There's one particular image I have in my mind of Steve banging on my dorm room door at around midnight. Flicking the light on and off with one hand and holding his open Bible with the other, he barged in, yelling, "Hey, Garry, wake up, wake up. Look, I've been reading in the book of Genesis. These genealogies don't really add up right and it doesn't seem to make sense. How do you explain this?"

Half asleep, I muttered something like, "Steve, nothing adds up after midnight. Just go to bed and forget about it. Ask me again in the morning." (I had developed similar stalling techniques for occasions such as this. It got him out of my way just long enough so I could run over and flip through the commentaries in search of answers to his questions!) Steve was always raising spiritual questions, many of which I could not answer. That kept *both* of us in search mode. He continued reading the Bible and seeking the truth with intensity, and it was simply amazing to watch.

Steve expressed a concern that even though he had gone to church occasionally while growing up, he hadn't heard much of anything the Bible actually teaches. "I don't ever remember learning what it means to be a Christian," he admitted. "So," he formally announced one day, "I scheduled an appointment to meet with the minister of my former church, because I've got some hard questions for him." Then, elbowing me, he added, "But I promised him you would be there too!"

I wondered what in the world I was getting myself into as I went with Steve to meet with his former minister. Then I watched in awe as Steve quoted John 14:6. "Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.' Now please explain this verse to me," Steve pleaded. "Is Jesus the only way to get to God or not?" Steve challenged that minister with many difficult questions from the Bible that day. It was one of the most remarkable encounters I've ever witnessed — a non-Christian confronting a religious leader about not taking the Bible's claims seriously enough.

Then, a few months later, it happened. Another knock came on my dorm room door. And I will always remember this one. Steve

walked in with a big announcement. “Garry, I’ve been reading the Bible now for some time. I’ve studied it and I’ve asked a lot of questions and I’ve even prayed. But I think it’s finally time. I want to invite Jesus Christ into my life. I’d like to receive his forgiveness and I’d like to follow him as best I can.”

“You’re kidding. I can’t believe it!” I replied. He then asked if I would pray with him to make that commitment. So right there in that dorm room we prayed together, and he invited Jesus Christ to be the forgiver and the leader of his life.

Have you ever had that kind of thing happen to you? I’ll never forget that moment. It was the first time I ever had the chance to pray with someone to receive Christ — and it marked me forever. I’ll never forget hearing Steve pray in his own way and in his own words, admitting that he was a sinner in need of a Savior and inviting Jesus into his life. It was a privilege to witness the transformation process right before my eyes. It was in that moment that I became sold on the concept of providing a small group safe enough for non-Christians to come and bring their objections, questions, and obstacles in order to discuss spiritual things on a regular basis.

From that moment on, the trajectory of Steve’s life totally changed. He was the classic example of someone who was running away from God. But then he found a place safe enough to ask his questions and begin his investigation of Christianity. And now he had turned around and was running *toward* God, chasing after him with all his might and all his heart, trying to honor him in his life.

It blew me away how quickly Steve grew spiritually after that. He became even more intense about reading and studying the Bible. He joined a discipleship Bible study and started memorizing literally hundreds of verses.

On an early Saturday morning Steve was at my door again — it seemed he was always banging on that dorm room door. He shouted, “Garry, get up, get up, get up, we’re late.”

“What in the world are we late for?”

“There’s an evangelism training course starting right about now in the student union building, and we shouldn’t miss it! It’s a class about how to effectively share your faith, and you need to be there — you need the help! So let’s go; we’re late.”

The next thing I knew, we were running across campus to this evangelism class. I have this image seared in my mind: We're trying to get to the student union building on time and Steve's four or five paces ahead of me. I'm doing my best to keep up with him, but he's outrunning me. And I'm thinking to myself, *This guy is on fire! He's the one leading now—he's out ahead of me!* What an example and thrill to watch. It was awe-inspiring to observe Steve's growth up close like that.

I went on to graduate from Indiana and worked as a computer analyst for Andersen Consulting in Chicago, while Steve stayed at I.U. to get his master's degree in linguistics. A year or so later I received a phone call from him while I was in my office. "I need you to pray for me because I'm at a crossroads," he said. "I'm trying to figure out exactly what I'm going to do with my linguistics degree. I'm thinking about going with Wycliffe Bible Translators, but I have to decide between a short-term commitment and a lifetime commitment. It's one or the other, and I have to choose."

Six months later Steve called me with his decision. "I've made my commitment. I'm signed up with Wycliffe. It's what I want to do more than anything else. And that's not all. I decided to devote my whole life to serving Christ as a missionary with Wycliffe, translating the Bible into languages that aren't even written yet." Steve told me his initial assignment would take him into the jungles of Peru, South America.

In fact, Steve is still with Wycliffe, and to this day I receive monthly updates from him. Now, of course, these missionary reports are quite a bit different from the letters I used to read when I first heard about Steve. I can actually *print* these letters! Here's an excerpt from one of them.

Back in Peru. By God's grace I returned to Peru safely on August 31. After spending a few days in Lima to visit friends and renew my passport and visa, I flew out to the jungle where I have once again gotten back into my work, carrying out linguistic research and analysis and publishing studies of many different Peruvian languages.

He continues in his form letter with a complete update on his efforts in Peru, which he sends to all of his supporters. But as usual, my letter has a handwritten note at the bottom of it. This one says,

Garry, it was good to see you recently in Indianapolis. I continue to pray for you daily. God bless you in your work and relationships.

*In Jesus,  
Steve*

This became his pattern — the form letter with an encouraging handwritten note that always included the words *I continue to pray for you daily*. Finally I had to ask him about this. “Hey, Steve, I enjoy getting your monthly updates, but there’s one question I have. You keep saying you’re praying for me daily. What’s up with that? You don’t need to keep writing that, when you and I both know that’s not really the case.”

But Steve stopped me dead in my tracks. “Wait just a minute. Time out. You don’t understand. I *do* pray for you every day. I pray for you *every single day*.”

I was silent.

He continued, “I’m praying for your walk with Christ. I am praying for your ministry efforts. I’m praying for your relationships.” Then he added, “It’s the least I can do. After all, you were the one who opened up your small group to me. You invited me in and made it a safe place for me to raise my objections and ask my questions. I discovered a true relationship with Christ through that group, and I sort of owe you. I just want to show my appreciation and thank you by keeping you in my prayers. You know, Garry, I consider you to be sort of like a spiritual father to me. So I really *am* praying for you every day. And besides — if anyone needs it, it’s you!”

I tell Steve’s story for two reasons.

First, his story is an example of the power of a seeker small group, and an illustration of how God uses this amazing tool to reach people for himself. I’ve been leading small groups for spiritual seekers now for the past twenty-five years, and I’ve seen God use this evangelism concept in incredible ways. I cannot get over the impact this kind of group can make in the lives of non-Christians. And Steve’s story has served as a shining example that has energized me over the years to strive to motivate others to lead small groups designed specifically with seekers in mind. It’s also exactly what drives me to write this book.

But there is another, even more important reason for telling Steve's story. I am convinced that there is a "Steve" somewhere in your life too. Someone in and around your world is lost, disillusioned, and outside the family of God. But because of your natural connection with this "Steve," you could begin to build a genuine friendship with this person. You could invite him or her into a small gathering that you start up — a group context that would provide a safe environment for your seeking friend to discuss spiritual things, raise objections, or voice concerns. And who knows, eventually you just might have one of those life-changing encounters you'll carry around with you the rest of *your* life. And when that happens — when you play a role in leading someone across the line of faith — two lives will be changed for all eternity. The life of the one who received Christ *and yours* — because you were there!

Right now there's someone in your circle of influence — and there's someone in my world too — who could positively respond to the gospel message through this kind of specialized discussion group. There are men and women who are far from God but are open to launching the search. What if you were to build some true, caring friendships with each of them? What if, over time, you developed the courage to provide and lead a safe forum to which these seekers could bring their toughest spiritual questions? What if you were to facilitate a fun, relaxed environment where these seekers could raise their questions about God and their concerns about Christianity? What if you offered a safe place for them to discuss their spiritual issues on a regular basis? Just imagine what might happen. They just might find what they're looking for. They just might find Jesus — the only hope of the world!

## Defining the Terms

To start us off on the same page, certain terms used throughout this book need to be clearly defined and understood. First, someone is considered to be a non-Christian — no matter how far along this person is in his or her spiritual journey — if he or she has not yet personally received Jesus Christ as forgiver and leader. In addition, the terms "seeker," "seeking friend," "spiritual seeker," and "non-Christian" are used interchangeably and are, for the purposes of this book, one and the same. These terms signify anyone who has

not yet crossed the line of faith and accepted Jesus Christ into his or her life — regardless of whether or not the person is in the process of seeking God.

Of course, not all non-Christians are actually seeking; many are running away from God and purposely avoiding a relationship with him. (In fact, Romans 3:10–11 and John 6:44–45 teach that no one can truly seek God *without* his help.) And even those non-Christians who *are* prompted by the Holy Spirit to seek God are doing so at differing levels of intentionality and various degrees of intensity. For the sake of simplicity, though, I'll refer to every non-Christian as a “seeker.” This term has a much more positive, hopeful feel to it than most other descriptors — and besides, it's a more seeker-friendly (or seeker-sensitive) word because non-Christians can readily identify with it. (It's certainly far better than using terms like “heathen,” “pagan,” “hell-bound sinner,” or something worse!)

When it comes to evangelism, the Christian's goal is to understand a seeker's perspective and figure out the best ways to challenge that seeker about what it means to know God. And, then prayerfully attempt to give him or her opportunities to receive Jesus Christ as the only means of finding forgiveness and a true relationship with God. This is what we view as the evangelistic process.

A seeker small group, then, is defined as a community of roughly two to twelve seekers and one or two Christian leaders who gather on a regular basis, primarily to discuss spiritual matters. These groups consist of people from a whole range of ages and stages of life, including singles, men, women, couples, moms, or dads. Groups may be made up of one type or may be totally mixed. They meet at a wide variety of locations, from homes and offices to restaurants and churches to bookstores and park district picnic tables. A Christian organizes and leads the seeker small group and facilitates the discussions based on the seekers' spiritual concerns and issues. Usually, at least one apprentice (or coleader) who is also a Christian assists the group leader. The rest of the participants are predominately, if not all, non-Christians. (So maybe two or three people in the whole group are Christians, but all the others are non-Christians.) These non-Christians will outnumber the Christians — an important point to remember. As you will see later, this is a key component to the powerful impact potential in a seeker small group.

Obviously, another approach to small group evangelism is through small groups consisting of Christians. This is certainly a worthwhile option, where three to twelve Christians in the context of their own small group extend themselves to reach and assimilate non-Christians. This is often accomplished through inviting and enfolding one or two seekers right into the believers' existing small group meetings. In other cases, a small group of Christians may organize various activities or outreach events to which they can invite their seeking friends. Because this small group evangelism strategy is not tailored directly and entirely to the needs of seekers, it has not proved to be quite as effective in reaching them as are those groups specifically designed for seekers. Reaching seekers through believer small groups, although not the primary focus of this book, will be covered at length in chapter 9.

## Seekers Matter

The single greatest value behind the seeker small group strategy is this: Seekers matter. This is the foundation on which you will want to build your seeker small group. The phrase *Seekers matter to God; therefore they matter to us* is the premise behind every evangelistic endeavor at Willow Creek Community Church, and seeker small groups are no exception. All the principles and practical ideas and suggestions outlined in this book flow from this one value.

The Bible clearly illustrates this critical value in Matthew 9:10–12, 36–38 (MSG).

*When Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riff-raff?"*

*Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? . . . I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders." . . .*

*When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"*

My heart stirs as I picture this scene in my mind. How vividly I can see Jesus hanging out and eating with the “sinners” — the very

ones the religious leaders considered outcasts. Society's rejects. The lost ones. I can almost hear Jesus saying, "I've come to the sick because they are the ones with the real need, and I'm here to give them hope because they matter to me. They are like sheep without a shepherd; they're lost and confused and in need of guidance and direction. I care about them and I'm here for them. That's the reason I came into this world in the first place. Now, the question is this: who among you will go and work in my field? Look! The harvest is ready now and time is short. Who here will gather my treasured harvest?"

Such biblical images give us a picture of just how much non-believers matter to God. When Jesus looked at the crowds, he saw people from a spiritual perspective. He saw them as lost and downcast and distressed. His heart broke for them. He wept for lost people.

That's the heart of God toward those still outside his kingdom. And the question that needs to be raised before any consideration is given to launching a seeker small group is this: Do we view lost people in the same way God does? When seekers cross our paths, do our hearts break with compassion? When we encounter those outside God's family, do we think about their spiritual conditions? Do we recognize that they are like sheep without a shepherd and that they really matter to the Father? And do we truly believe that if they matter to him, they need to matter to us? If we sincerely have that kind of heart attitude toward seekers, it changes everything: our whole perspective about how we interact with them, how we treat each one, and how we organize small groups for them — including the way we lead and facilitate their small group discussions.

If you get nothing else from this chapter, get this: Seekers matter. Non-Christians matter. The question is, do they matter to *you*? Do they matter to *me*? Before we can go any further, we need to be very clear on this point. Some of us may need to do business with God and recalibrate ourselves so we're aligned with his priorities. We may need to get alone with God and pray, "Lord, give me a renewed passion for lost people. Give me a heart that breaks when I encounter non-Christians in the crowds. Give me the same compassion you have for them. Give me new eyes to see them as they really are — lost, separated from you, and distressed."

Once we allow God to reignite that fire for lost people in us, the rest flows more easily. Everything else about how to practically provide a small group in which seekers can safely search will become second nature, based on common sense. Give yourself fully to this premise, and you're halfway there.

## **A Closer Look**

If seekers really matter, it is important for us to make a serious attempt to understand who they are and where they're coming from as they take steps along their spiritual journey. We will want to know our seeking friends well, especially as we think about forming a small group specifically for them. We will want to focus on their needs and interests and to make sure the design and structure and climate of the group reflects an accurate understanding of these seekers in a number of ways.

### *Past Religious Experiences*

Consider the past religious experiences of non-Christians. Did they attend church services while growing up or not at all? What about now — is there any current church involvement? If so, to what extent? How have their religious views changed over the years? What religions have they explored and what religion would they most align themselves with now? And what have their interactions and encounters with religious people, including religious leaders, been like? Some people may have positive recollections, but many more may have negative memories of their religious experiences.

### *Biblical Understanding*

The seekers' level of biblical understanding needs to be taken into account. Have they ever read the Bible? What knowledge do they have of Scripture and to what extent do they understand biblical teachings? It is important for us to be sensitive to the fact that most non-Christians do not know what the Bible actually says, let alone believe it.

### *Spiritual Issues and Questions*

We need to be aware that seekers are likely to have a number of intellectual objections and questions. Typically, they have many

unresolved issues and concerns about Christianity. Too many times, I'm afraid, Christians have the feeling that we desperately need to tell non-Christians the Good News *before* we even try to understand what objections they're raising. *And we end up answering questions they're not asking.* It is far wiser for us to first know what specific objections and questions are going through their minds — and even to take the time to understand *why* they have the questions they do — and then respond accordingly.

### *Other Barriers and Breakthroughs*

Equally important to knowing where seekers are coming from on a spiritual level is to understand where they're at on other levels in their lives. Over time it's important to allow seekers to feel the freedom and acceptance to disclose the emotional, physical, and mental barriers they're facing, along with any breakthroughs they've realized in those areas. And as leaders, we must be willing to develop a caring attitude for the whole person. That includes openly sharing what's going on in our own lives as well as drawing out issues on a variety of levels from our group members. One seeker in my group, distraught over the death of a loved one, was so angry with God that she was in no position to participate in our group's discussions until she addressed her frustrations. The group graciously gave her time to process her emotions. This is, in part, what it means to "be there" for those seekers who mean so much to us.

### *Spiritual Darkness and Blindness*

We need to remember that non-Christians live in spiritual darkness and blindness. The Bible clearly teaches that spiritual seekers — people without Christ — are alive physically but dead spiritually. They are spiritually blind. It is important for us to be patient and caring as we bear this truth in mind.

As group participants express their thoughts and ideas about spiritual issues, you will notice that their views are, at times, filled with poor theology and even biblical heresy. But as we recognize that our friends have spiritual blinders on, we will understand that they simply are not yet able to see the big picture clearly. This is explained more fully in 1 Corinthians 2:13–14: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words

taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Once we understand that seekers are not going to be able to see some spiritual truths until they accept Christ into their lives, we’re more likely to dispel our need to attack or correct their views. Instead we’ll remind ourselves that it’s not necessary to immediately correct every last one of their misconceptions; our job is to patiently invite seekers to discover spiritual truths over time along the way. Understanding where they’re coming from and recognizing their spiritual condition takes some of the pressure off, and we can be more concerned with providing a safe place for them to ask their questions and make their observations about biblical truths without fear of condemnation or criticism.

### *Five Phases of Spiritual Discovery*

It is usually fairly easy to determine the intensity level of a non-Christian’s spiritual quest. For example, there are cynical people who have spent a lifetime avoiding Christianity at all costs, and those who are somewhat less resistant but still quite skeptical. Some people are neutral about spiritual matters—simply spectators making observations from a safe distance. (In some ways apathy or indifference expresses more opposition than hostility does.) Even among those who are more deliberately seeking, there are differences. Some lack confidence and are unsure what they believe, while others assign a low priority to their search. And then, of course, there are those seekers who are seriously pursuing spiritual matters and sincerely looking for answers.

But as we interact with our seeking friends about spiritual matters, there is another factor to be aware of besides the *intensity* of their search—and that’s the *stage* of their discovery process. After observing hundreds of non-Christians take steps of faith in all kinds of settings, I’ve concluded that seekers advance through five distinct phases of spiritual discovery—and it’s one of the most critical realizations I’ve encountered. If we can carefully and adequately identify where our seeking friends are in their discovery process, we will gain a much better understanding of how to best support and encourage them in their search for truth.

*Phase 1: Identification.* Seekers identify what they believe.

This phase is where most seekers really begin their spiritual journey — by figuring out where they stand and exactly what they believe. Here, non-Christians identify just what it is they think about God, the meaning of life, death, the afterlife, and many other spiritual issues. Generally speaking, seekers have rarely come to grips with what they specifically believe about these important matters. So we serve our seeking friends well when we ask questions to prompt them (and assist us) to define what they believe. Some examples of Phase 1 questions include the following: What do you believe about God? Who do you think Jesus is? What do you suppose happens after we die? What's your assessment of the Bible?

*Phase 2: Clarification.* Seekers clarify why they believe what they do.

Next, non-Christians need to move one step beyond identifying *what* they believe to clarifying *why* they hold those beliefs. Few seekers have taken the time to establish solid reasons for what they believe — they are not naturally driven to defend their spiritual viewpoints. Again, we demonstrate respect toward our seeking friends and family members when we make the effort to genuinely understand the reasons behind their beliefs. Phase 2 questions can include: Why do you believe there is no God? Help me understand why you think there is no life after this one? Give me your reasons for believing that all roads lead to God.

*Phase 3: Exploration.* Seekers explore alternative truth options.

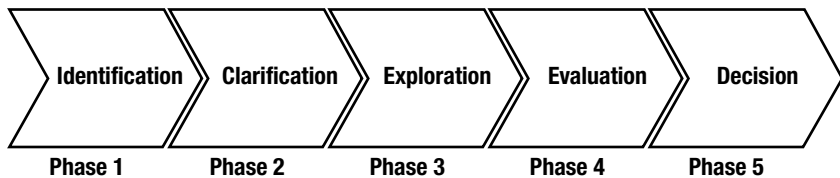
Once seekers have put forth the effort to determine what and why they believe, they often become dissatisfied with their current beliefs. This is an exciting step in their journeys because they are at a place where they are ready and willing to seek after the truth. However, this process can also be somewhat chaotic because at this juncture seekers are usually left with more questions than answers — and more doubts than certainties. This unsettling notion often causes an eye-opening awareness that there just might be more to life than what they have experienced — and that something is missing. It's at this stage that seekers become eager to explore other options, including biblical truth, and are most open and receptive to hearing a clear presentation of the gospel. We wouldn't want to miss this opportunity.

*Phase 4: Evaluation.* Seekers evaluate new discoveries.

At this point, seekers begin to earnestly assess the validity of their beliefs and wrestle with the tough questions and objections they have about the claims of Christianity as well as other faiths. More than at any other time, they are willing to make comparisons between what they believe and what the Bible teaches — and determine which makes more sense from an intellectual perspective. We should make ourselves available to join them in this process and gently guide them toward biblical truths.

*Phase 5: Decision.* Seekers decide what to believe.

This stage in the process is very significant for non-Christians, because these crucial decisions of acceptance and belief not only involve the mind, but also the heart and the will. This is why most seekers draw conclusions about spiritual matters incrementally. For example, after moving through each of the phases, a seeker may decide to accept the existence of a personal God but then turn around and go back through the various phases again before making other decisions about the authority of the Bible or the identity of Jesus. It may take a series of such decisions before he or she eventually makes a commitment to receive and follow Christ.



Seekers make spiritual discoveries in stages, and we must look for ways to honor this process as we reach out to them. For example, to more effectively share the gospel with our seeking friends (Phase 3), we must be willing to first take the time to genuinely understand what they believe (Phase 1) and why they believe it (Phase 2). And to someday earn the right to challenge our friends to make a solid decision for Christ (Phase 5), we must first engage them in ample dialogue about how to overcome their barriers to belief (Phase 4). We should be careful to resist the temptation to prematurely jump into Phase 3 and then skip over to Phase 5 without any regard to dealing

with the spiritual issues related to the other phases. Otherwise we run the risk of unintentionally alienating our seeking friends.

Without a doubt, of course, the Holy Spirit can intercede at any moment in any phase and bring anyone to faith in Christ. But in general, our outreach efforts should demonstrate respect for this spiritual discovery process. And as you learn throughout the pages of this book, your seeker small group can provide a safe environment for seekers to progress through each phase — as many times as it takes — and make life-changing biblical discoveries along the way.

In my view, the most effective strategy to helping seekers advance through these phases and take steps of spiritual progress is something I've called "Empathic Evangelism." It's a simple outreach concept that can be summarized in one short statement: *Ask great questions and listen well.* This approach, outlined more thoroughly in chapters 5 and 6, has greatly served me in assisting seekers through the various spiritual discovery phases — especially within the context of a seeker small group setting. As we reach out to our seeking friends, we must take the time to ask great questions, listen well, and seek to fully understand the concerns of their minds and hearts. That will truly demonstrate the love of Christ and honor them in the process. And then, over time, we'll find ourselves with all kinds of opportunities to guide seekers to discover biblical truths for themselves.

In his book *Between the Words*, Norm Wakefield stresses the importance of honoring seekers in this way: "Frequently during my workshops and seminars on listening someone will say, 'You mean, all I can do is listen when I know the person is saying something wrong? That doesn't seem right. I need to straighten the person out. Isn't that an act of love?' If you are familiar with the Bible, you know that we *are* to offer counsel to the confused, correction to the erring, and even rebuke to the unrepentant sinner. The question is not whether or not such responses are appropriate — *it is a question of timing.*"<sup>1</sup>

### *Trust Level*

Finally, it is critical to ascertain the trust level of seekers concerning spiritual matters. In other words, how much trust will they place in a Christian friend or the Bible or a Christian church or God

or Jesus Christ? People with a low level of spiritual trust usually are very cynical or skeptical about spiritual things, the Bible, or the church. And they certainly don't place their trust in God or in his Son, Jesus Christ. A really skeptical non-Christian will often question the agenda or motivation behind a Christian's efforts to befriend them, and thus try to avoid such interactions. Seekers who attend church usually have a somewhat higher trust level. It is important to figure out how much trust your seeking friends have or don't have in these spiritual areas and meet them where they are — and look for authentic ways to earn their trust and respect.

No two seekers are alike and, as with all healthy relationships, it requires sincere effort and patience to truly get to know someone. It's crucial to demonstrate your genuine care. The cliché is old but it's still true: *Seekers don't really care how much you know until they know how much you really care.* This is exactly why it's important to understand where your seeker friends are coming from and where they are in their spiritual journeys. And it's this depth of care, concern, and understanding toward your seeking friends that will shape the kind of small group you form.

Weigh these insights carefully before starting your seeker small group. They must drive everything you do. The rest of this book provides many practical ideas and suggestions for launching seeker small groups, and each and every one is based on our understanding that seekers matter. In reality, these groups are tailor-made for non-Christians — they're specifically designed from start to finish with the seekers' needs and concerns in the forefront of our thinking. When leaders put the needs and wants of seekers before their own, a seeker small group can be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools there is.

## Distinct Advantages

A seeker small group is a customized approach to reaching non-Christians. There are three distinct advantages to using this razor-sharp tool for reaching out to our friends and family for Christ.

### *A Very Safe Place*

The real beauty of a seeker small group is the remarkable extent to which seekers feel safe and secure. The first distinct advantage of a

seeker small group is that it's a very safe place. Seekers can investigate the claims of Christianity at their own pace. They are accepted no matter where they are in their spiritual journeys. If they have little or no knowledge of the Bible, that's okay. If they are cynical or skeptical, they are welcomed anyway. There is no judgment, only a spirit of acceptance. ("What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?" [1 Corinthians 5:12].) The goal of this safe place is to provide an invitation, opportunity, and environment for seekers to openly express their thoughts and feelings, to voice their observations and questions, and even to go so far as to assert their objections — all without inhibition or any fear of criticism. The hope is that they will get to the place where they look forward to sharing their issues and concerns about the Bible and its claims. It's been my experience that once they get to this point, they will enjoy even more the process of searching out the answers for themselves.

One of the components of the safety that unchurched people crave is having a place where they can connect with other seekers. There is definitely safety in numbers, and when the majority of participants are non-Christians, they can identify with each others' spiritual questions and concerns. Time and time again I've heard seekers say to another things like, "Oh, I can't believe you just said that! That's a good issue you just raised. I've had that same concern for a long time but thought I was the only one. Having some of the same questions as the rest of you makes me feel better." When seekers identify with one another, it legitimizes their questions and objections — and that's a great way to create a secure environment.

Seekers also feel safe when they are allowed to discover spiritual truths on their own. They're not coming to the group to hear a lecture or get talked at; instead leaders orchestrate a dynamic discussion in such a way that seekers have "aha moments" over and over again. The group provides the forum for an amazing process in which seekers investigate and learn on their own, in their own way, and at their own pace.

Safety, then, is the first distinct advantage of a seeker small group: a safe place for seekers to seek, a safe place to connect with other seekers, and a safe place for them to discover spiritual truths for themselves.

## *A Highly Effective Tool for Evangelism*

A second distinct advantage of a seeker small group is that it's a highly effective tool for evangelism. Over the years here at Willow Creek, we have seen scores and scores of non-Christians cross the line of faith within the context of seeker small groups. These groups have become one of the most effective evangelistic tools we have at our disposal. In fact, Bill Hybels, our senior pastor, recently told our congregation that he considers "seeker small groups to be one of the greatest discoveries we've made at Willow in the last several years."

But a word of caution is in order here. Some people have the mistaken belief that a seeker small group is a quick fix for instant evangelistic success, without any need for building solid friendships with seekers. They erroneously think it's a substitute for *personal* evangelism, and their hope is that the seeker group can become a magic formula for instant conversions in and of itself. In reality, though, quite the opposite is true; it's not a substitute, it's a *supplement* for evangelism. It's very important to understand that a seeker group cannot take the place of the leader's own personal relationships with non-Christians. It's only a tool — a means to an end — for effective evangelism, given the context of thriving friendships with seekers.

In large part that effectiveness depends on the leader's personal evangelistic efforts. Not that the leader needs to be an evangelism giant — in fact, as we shall see later, the leader doesn't need to have the spiritual gift of evangelism or be an expert on the subject or even be very experienced in efforts to bring people to Christ. But a leader of a seeker small group *must* be willing to get involved in the lives of the seekers in his or her care.

Once the seeker small group is viewed as a tool or supplement within the evangelistic process — an extension of the leader's personal evangelistic efforts — the leader can establish and maintain genuine friendships, build bridges of trust, and enter into occasional dialogues about Christianity with a few non-Christians. Then, as a supplement to the evangelistic process that has already been established, the leader can invite these individuals to visit the group as a way to continue the spiritual discussions with others who are also seeking.

Have you ever had the experience of using a few good illustrations to share your faith with someone and then having him or her say to you, “Well, that sounds fascinating. I never thought about things that way before. It seems like a nice idea — for you — but it’s not really something I’m interested in right now.” At that point the conversation comes to a screeching halt. You don’t really know where to go from there, and the next time you see your friend, you’re not sure how to come back around and pick up the conversation. You’re just sort of stuck.

But while it’s difficult to know how to reengage when a previous conversation has ended so abruptly, a seeker small group provides a built-in “excuse” for ongoing dialogue about spiritual matters. It’s like having a set appointment every week with a group of non-Christians to talk about faith-related issues. It’s far easier — both for the leader and the seeker — to strike up spiritual conversations on a regular basis when it’s already scheduled. In fact, I’ve had seekers tell me they were working on a whole list of objections to Christianity and could hardly wait to bring it to the next group meeting to discuss. For them, the group became their own special opportunity to fully engage in the seeking process. It was something they really looked forward to!

In addition, what transpires during the seeker group can prompt conversations that take place outside the group. If the leader notes various individual responses, he or she can initiate a time to get together on a one-on-one basis and dig deeper into those particular issues. Group discussions provide easy avenues for the leader to meet with each group member individually, share meals, or hang out together and get to know each other better. The leader can ask to hear more about certain issues, inquire about what exactly the seeker meant by something he or she said, or simply ask how the group is meeting that person’s needs. This is an excellent chance to help the seeker take one more step in his or her spiritual journey — and another example of how the group can become a vehicle for ongoing personal evangelism.

### *An Easily Transferable Concept*

The third distinct advantage of the seeker small group strategy is that it’s easily transferable. Seeker groups work well in a wide variety

of church and ministry settings, styles, and formats. And whether the church utilizes a traditional worship format, a seeker-sensitive or seeker-targeted approach, or anything in between, these small groups can flourish. No radical changes within your church or ministry structure are needed to launch these groups.

This evangelistic tool offers an excellent next step for seekers already attending a church or taking part in a ministry. Until we made seeker small groups available at Willow Creek, we did not have next steps for the seekers who came to our weekend services. We had lots of next steps for believers — Christians could get connected into small groups and find places to serve. Seekers, though, were at a loss as to what to do beyond attending our services on a regular basis. Now we have discovered the perfect outlet for them. Once we established a seeker small groups ministry, hundreds and hundreds of seekers stepped out and got connected into these groups, facilitating forward movement in their own spiritual journeys. And the missing next step for seekers attending our services had been found.

More recently, our seeker small groups have also become a springboard for unchurched seekers. Those not yet ready to attend services can find freedom and safety within a seeker small group to take steps along their spiritual paths. These groups meet in the neighborhoods and in the marketplace, and as group participants make progress in their spiritual journeys, they inevitably become interested in getting connected to a church where they can grow in their understanding and interest in spiritual things.

In summary, a seeker small group is a highly transferable concept. It is easily adaptable within any church or ministry setting. It is an excellent next step for seekers already attending church services, as well as a great springboard for seekers not yet ready for church.

## A Challenge

As you read this book, I want to extend this challenge to you. From this point on, read with the mind-set that you will indeed launch your own seeker small group. Put yourself in the position of reading with the intention of actually forming, in your context, such a group in the near future. Prayerfully, think in terms of how you personally might apply the principles and ideas outlined here

to your own environment, and dream about the possibilities of what God might do through your efforts. See yourself, with the help of an apprentice or two, starting your own group specifically designed for seekers. Imagine identifying an ideal setting, maybe in your church, your workplace, or your neighborhood, and inviting seekers to join you on a regular basis for a discussion about spiritual matters. Envision yourself leading seekers to Christ through a seeker small group.

If you will agree to take on this challenge, you will put yourself in a better position to more fully digest the ideas in this book. You will find yourself growing with excitement about the possibilities. And you will achieve greater retention of the material because you will be more highly motivated to figure out how you can apply it to your situation.

Are you up for the challenge? Are you in? I hope so. Because if you're on board, you're in for the ride of your life. So grab a partner and get ready to roll, because you're about to embark on the exciting adventure of launching your very own seeker small group.

## Your Response

Once you have accepted this challenge, hundreds of questions and obstacles or even fears may enter your thoughts. What hurdles jumped to mind? What are your initial hesitations? What roadblocks can you foresee? The first step in overcoming these obstacles is to simply identify specifically what they are. Other potential leaders have gone through this exercise over the years, and perhaps you can identify with some of their initial concerns.

- I wouldn't know where to start.
- I'm not an evangelist.
- I'm not a leader.
- How much of my time will it take to lead a seeker group?
- Where do I find seekers for my group?
- I don't have any non-Christian friends to invite to a group.
- How do I avoid viewing seekers as my projects?
- How do I keep from having an agenda with my non-Christian friends?
- Why would seekers make the time to come to a group?

- How do I get seekers to show up for the group meetings?
- Is it really possible to get people who are far from God to come to a spiritual discussion?
- If seekers do show up, what do I do with them?
- I'm not good at leading a group discussion.
- I'm not knowledgeable enough about the Bible to do this.
- I wouldn't know how to prepare for a group discussion.
- How would I deal with tough questions the seekers would ask?
- I'm lacking any apologetic skills.
- How do I adequately care for the seekers in the group?
- What happens to the seekers in the group after they become Christians?
- Where will I find support for questions I have about leading this group?

The bad news is that this list of concerns may look long and overwhelming; the good news is that hundreds of leaders have discovered the solutions to overcome these obstacles. And you will too. In fact, the primary goal of this book is to address these barriers, and other related issues, one by one and to disclose the breakthroughs many have already found. My prayer is that as you read on, you will become fully equipped and supported to move forward with your dream to see seekers come to faith in Christ. And the best news is that you are *not* alone — as you take steps to launch a seeker small group, God is right there with you. “For God did not give a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

## CLAYTON LEE'S STORY

*Property Manager  
Folsom, California*

*M*y seeker small group experiences have been fantastic. In all my life I've never seen God work so powerfully or so swiftly in the lives of seekers. I discovered that more than anything else, group leaders need to be open, accepting, trustworthy, and real—because leading these groups effectively has more to do with one's heart for seekers than one's ability.

Four years ago, I led my first seeker group at my church with absolutely no training or experience. But thankfully, that lack of knowledge and skill didn't seem to matter. God demonstrated the special place he has in his heart for seekers by doing some amazing things anyway. Nearly everyone in that group made a decision for Christ—twenty-two people in all! Good thing I didn't wait until I was completely ready to start—because that day never would have come. Instead I had to step out and take a risk.

Penny came to the first meeting dragging her husband, Dave. He sat in the chair with his arms crossed and a smug look on his face. Given the chance, he would have gone for my jugular. I could see it in his eyes—he was out to get me. From the outset, I tried to explain that our group was an open forum where everyone could explore Christianity at his or her own pace. I told them I'd challenge their thinking, but I'd never push them beyond what they were ready to do. After I gave those disclaimers, Dave seemed to relax. At the next meeting Dave tried very hard not to participate, but he did listen.

By the fourth session I could see his heart start to soften. After the meeting I suggested we get together sometime. "Great," he replied. "Let's go out and have a cold beer." His response threw me for a loop. But the next day, over a beer, he told me all about his favorite pastime—watching ball games and getting plastered with "the boys." He added that he didn't enjoy any other activities.

A few weeks later, as I began our group discussion, Dave interrupted me. "I want to tell you all something," he said. This was practically the first time Dave spoke up during a meeting, so we were all eager to hear what he was going to say.

*“You know, after listening to these group discussions, I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not so much what you know. It’s more about where your heart is.”* Silence. At that moment I wanted to jump out of my chair and dance around the room! I contained myself, however, and calmly replied, *“Dave, you have uncovered a mystery that very few people understand.”*

*Not long after that he accepted Christ into his life. He’s a committed Christian now, with no desire to go back to the life he had before.*

*Another guy hauled to our small group by his wife was Marty. He had a reputation for being a party animal. At our meetings he would brag about his drinking episodes, drug addictions, and womanizing in front of his wife. In private conversations with me, he shared repulsive stories about his life.*

*Marty was very argumentative — he disagreed with just about everything anyone said. And I had a difficult time figuring out how to address Marty’s questions without riling him. Finally, I took him aside and promised to fully address his issues privately if he would give me two or three weeks to research them. He then backed off from instigating so many arguments. He started to listen more, and I began to notice a glimmer of transformation happening within him.*

*At the end of one meeting I decided to take a very big risk with Marty. Almost every week I closed our discussions with a twenty-second prayer. This time I asked Marty if he would say the prayer. To everyone’s surprise, he prayed — out loud! I was totally flabbergasted that someone so far away from God would pray publicly.*

*About a week later he announced that he had decided to make some drastic lifestyle changes and pursue a relationship with God. Eventually he became convinced that Jesus Christ was the only way to obtain complete forgiveness and true fulfillment and turned his life over to him. Today he’s growing strong in Christ.*

*Dave and Marty are just two examples of the amazing transformation that took place in the lives of those in my seeker group. But there are so many more amazing stories. God answered prayers and changed people for eternity through that group — and I got to be a part of it!*

## DAVE VOSS'S STORY

*Retired High School Teacher  
Folsom, California*

*I'm a very private person and I've always had a difficult time opening up about my deeper feelings — especially those of a spiritual nature. I knew that in Clayton's small group I would be expected to talk, so I was very reluctant to go. But my wife, Penny, convinced me to give it a try.*

*Even though I showed up, I remember sitting in the meetings with my arms folded in a defensive position. I had all kinds of questions that I doubted Clayton would allow us to discuss. But instead he welcomed my skepticism — and I couldn't believe that. I felt my heart soften. In fact, I even started to read the Bible.*

*The friendships Penny and I have developed in that group are so much deeper than anything I've ever experienced before. And Clayton and I just seemed to click right away. It's not a typical thing for me to open up like I did — I'm more standoffish. But the more I got to know Clayton, the more I admired his Christian example. I tend to analyze all sides — weighing this and that — before making a decision. But it wasn't too difficult to draw a conclusion about Christ after spending time with Clayton.*

*It's impossible to describe how grateful I am that Clayton invited me to search for answers in his group in spite of all my doubts. During our discussions I had a growing sense that something was missing in my life and marriage. Deep down I knew I was ultimately looking to fill that void with something spiritual. That's when I became more receptive to Clayton's suggestions that I seriously consider Jesus. Eventually I invited Jesus to forgive me and take away my emptiness.*

*Since receiving Christ, I've become involved in ministry-related activities. Penny and I attend a Thursday night Bible study with four other Christian couples, and I joined a men's accountability group. Also, since I play guitar, I enjoy worshiping God through music. Two Sundays ago I performed during the services with the worship team. I did a lot of praying and practicing beforehand, and it went well. I know I had extra help from God. That was an amazing experience for me.*

*I've been volunteering for other service activities at church, like directing traffic on Sunday mornings. I've helped with Communion services too. I'm fifty-nine years old now — and I've served God and others more in the past year than in the other fifty-eight years of my life combined. And finding ways to honor and love God is exactly how I want to spend all my remaining time.*

## MARTY SPEER'S STORY

*Architectural Assistant  
Folsom, California*

*Growing up, I had never known anything about religion or church. I was far away from God and never even had a clue about who Jesus was. In high school I was a drinker and a hard-core partier. At twenty-one I started smoking weed regularly, as well as doing all kinds of other drugs. I was doing so much partying on a daily basis that I started drinking and doing drugs as soon as I woke up. In my first marriage I had multiple affairs. The guilt from that is something that I still live with today. I was a really bad guy. And I never imagined God would ever want anything to do with me — except maybe to get rid of me.*

*But one day my wife took me to a seeker small group. A guy named Clayton led it — and it was a great small group experience. To be honest, I have to admit that I was the biggest skeptic in the group. I asked a lot of very hard questions — and even some stupid ones. But they were things I really wanted to know. I liked to think that I kept the discussions interesting! For the first time ever, things in my life started to look up.*

*Over time Clayton and that small group challenged me to invite Jesus Christ into my life — and into my heart and soul. What a profound turning point it was for me when I asked Jesus to forgive and transform me — because he did just that. I was a broken man. I still am to a degree, and that's why every day I renew my invitation to the Lord to come into my heart, take over my will, and give me guidance. Now, thanks to the influence of that group, that's what I want more than anything.*