

*Make Yourselves Comfortable**

By Martha Reapsome

Can you recall how you felt when you joined a new group? What did you think about as you drove to the first meeting? How did you feel trying to learn the names of a dozen strangers? Or when some people greeted each other as old friends? What happened in the first few minutes to make you begin to relax or to withdraw silently?

All small groups begin with feelings of uncertainty. Every group begins with members wondering, "Will I fit in?" "Will they like me?" "Will I have anything to contribute?"

Here are some suggestions for making people comfortable at any stage in your small group's life, but especially at the beginning.

Check for physical and emotional comfort.

Are the temperature, ventilation, and lighting right? Does the seating provide for maximum eye contact?

Check the acceptance level. Is it safe to question and to admit failure or problems in the group? To be a little different? To be new to the Bible?

Does everyone know the "rules of the game," what your group agreed upon as your purpose and use of the time? Be sure to fill in new members. Ask your group occasionally, "Are we keeping to our agreement?"

Does everyone know each other's names? Providing name tags at the beginning of the season or when a new person visits the group is a much appreciated courtesy.

Encourage maximum participation.

Take turns hosting the group. When you meet in homes, the family pictures, pets, books, and decor reflecting interests and hobbies are important parts of learning to know each other. Keep hospitality simple. It's not a baking or decorating contest.

Take turns leading the discussion and the worship time. Since the leader prepares the most, and therefore learns the most, share the maximum learning experience. The leader isn't the expert or authority for the group.

Pass around the responsibility of calling absentees.

Use a Bible study guide with questions that stimulate thinking and discussion (but avoid guides with so much commentary that they, rather than the text, become the focus of the study). The guide serves as an equalizer in the group. Those new to the Bible and those familiar with it can learn together. One group began using a guide on Romans after weeks of just using the Bible and a commentary. Julie announced, "Now I can understand this. I'm so new to the Bible, I never had anything to contribute, but I can find the answers to these questions."

Keep the group at a size that allows everyone to participate. When everyone shows up the same night, you may want to divide into smaller groups for prayer time or discussion. If the group gets too big, the quiet ones get quieter.

Come as a fellow learner and pilgrim.

Adults can learn and change. The Bible is understandable. Some adults have had negative experiences that damaged their confidence in their learning ability. They need encouragement.

Just as all new groups begin with feelings of uncertainty, all learning is uncomfortable. Remember how you felt during your first driving lesson? But practicing a new skill gives confidence. Now you can start the car and back out of the driveway without thinking. If your group feels awkward learning new skills, keep practicing. You'll learn to relax.

Small groups aren't for experts but for learners and footsore pilgrims. By listening to another's words and feelings, we make them comfortable. By respecting the person we don't understand, we grow and encourage their growth.

*Used by permission of Discipleship Journal. Copyright 1994, The Navigators. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. To subscribe, visit www.discipleshipjournal.com, or call (800) 877-1811