

Taming Boredom in a Small Group

A case study in application

By Pat J. Sikora

The Case

Have you ever led a group and knew something was wrong, but you couldn't put your finger on it? That happened to me several years ago. The problem resulted in open rebellion, which in turn led to a great learning opportunity that has served me well in the years since.

I was leading one of several small groups within a larger women's Bible study. I had about a dozen women in my group, which is more than I consider ideal. Discussions were lifeless and clunky. I had tried everything I knew to engage the women in meaningful discussions, but was having little success. Every question was met with dull stares and one-word answers. Since I was a fairly experienced leader, I chalked it up to the size of the group, the particular mix of women, and the fact that I kept getting the newcomers, which interrupted the flow of cohesiveness. I was frustrated and I knew they were, too, but I couldn't figure out the problem.

Then one day, Paula called and said, "Pat, I hate to do this, but I'm quitting the group." When I asked her why, she said, "That study is so BORING! I can't stand it! It insults my intelligence and I come away with nothing. In fact, I come away mad at having wasted an evening. And others feel that way too. They just won't say anything yet."

Instantly, I knew she had discerned the problem. The ministry was using a popular study guide produced by a well-known publisher—the kind of study guide you find in every Christian bookstore. Unfortunately, it was indeed boring. It did insult the intelligence of an average reader. And it was not leading to dynamic discussions, growth, or interest. In fact, it was leading to yawns and absenteeism.

What was the problem? When I evaluated it more closely, I realized that the study guide was all objective questions. Ten objective questions every week. Week after week.

Now don't get me wrong. Objective questions are essential in a Bible study. An objective question asks, "What does the text say." It's vital for Bible students to read the text and identify what it actually says rather than what they think it might say or what they once heard it said or what they want it to say. Objective questions establish the "who, what, when, where, and how" of a biblical passage. They help make sure people aren't just shooting from the hip with their opinions, but are actually reading and studying the text.

But these questions were boring. Objective questions can be written in an interesting way, but these weren't. They were on the level of, "What did Jesus say in verse 3?" When questions like that are repeated ten times in a row, it creates a sing-songy feeling and does indeed insult the intelligence of the reader.

What Would You Do?

1. Have you experienced a curriculum guide that contained boring information or questions? Were you able to fix it?
2. Is it acceptable to abandon a curriculum guide in the middle? What if people paid to purchase the material?
3. How can a group leader discern the difference between a boring study and group members who are not actively attempting to make the most of the material?

What Happened

I immediately knew what I needed to do. "Paula," I told my friend, "I agree with you. You've identified a problem I knew was there, but couldn't figure it out. Let's make a deal. You stay in the group and do the homework for background, but I'll rewrite the discussion questions so we have a good blend of questions. On Wednesday nights, we'll focus on application."

She agreed to give it a try—with the caveat that she reserved the right to leave if it was still boring. I had my work cut out for me. I got busy and rewrote the study for the next week, adding a liberal dose of interpretive and application questions. When I took them to the group the following week, I explained what we were doing and everyone heaved a huge sigh of relief. Paula was right; everyone had been bored.

That week we had our first dynamic discussion. Members started opening up about their questions, their needs, and their struggles. They began even that first week to apply the passage to their lives. As the weeks went on, our discussions became even more enthusiastic and more fun. And best of all, women began to see the power of the Word of God in their lives. They began to tackle issues that had previously been hidden and things began to change.

After a couple of weeks, members in the other small groups began hearing about what we were doing. Their leaders wanted my questions for their groups. Soon the whole ministry was using my re-written questions and every group began to see the same changes I had seen. What had begun as a ho-hum year took on new life and the women were excited.

In the spring, the steering committee asked if I would consider writing the study for the next year. "Why buy a study and have to rewrite it?" they reasoned. After much prayer and with fear and trembling, I agreed. I spent the summer creating an inductive, topical study through the Book of Joshua that focuses on the personal giants that prevent each of us from conquering his or her Promised Land—that is, being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. It interweaves the four types of questions that lead to dynamic discussions and life change—icebreakers, objective, interpretive, and application—into a cohesive lesson that moves the reader toward personal, deep change. Best of all, application questions are woven throughout the study rather than being stuck at the end, and those are the questions the leader is encouraged to ask and discuss.

The other types of questions are valuable, and I believe they form the foundation for personal understanding—but not for my small-group time. Focusing on application questions seems to be more effective in nailing down the personal changes in people's lives. Those are the questions that ask for commitment and don't let the reader off the hook. Those are the questions that result in growth and maturity.

So, if your small group is lacking enthusiasm, take a look at the questions in the study guide you're using. It could be that you have an easy problem to fix. Just add more application and watch your members grow.

—PAT J. SIKORA is a SmallGroups.com Editorial Advisor, founder of [Mighty Oak Ministries](#), and author of [Why Didn't You Warn Me? How to Deal with Challenging Group Members](#).