

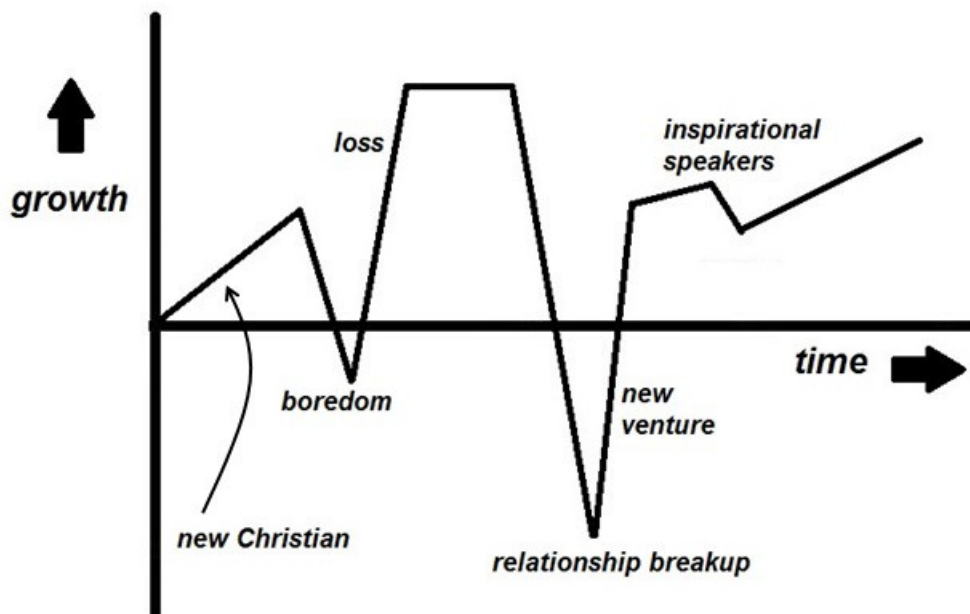
## Listening

The person leading a Bible study group should be a good listener. But this is not just about listening for the right answers to the questions. Listening is about people – how they react, detecting what they are like and where they are coming from – and remembering who said what so that you can get back to them.

Listening will give you some idea about what the group understands from the Bible passage. You need to react to those answers to decide if you need to ask another question to clarify the point or if you can go deeper into the topic or move on to the next one.

One thing that can be very encouraging is that, if the leader is listening well, he or she can say something like “Bill brought up that idea earlier, can you say something more about it?” or “I can see Sue’s point of view but from what Bill said earlier I don’t think you would agree with her would you?” Or, if you don’t want to put Bill on the spot ask “What do the rest of you think?” It shows that you are listening to people, valuing their answers and allowing their words shape where the study is going rather than ploughing through question after question from a prescribed script. You need to listen to what people say, remember who said it and mention their name when referring back to what was said.

For example, we were doing a study on Jeremiah chapters 34 to 38. During the course of the study we would be looking at the things Jeremiah’s own people did to him and connect the persecution of Jeremiah with the idea of growth. So, to begin the study I asked people to draw a graph of their growth since becoming a Christian (like the graph below). Some of my opening questions are better than others and this one didn’t work so well. I got a better response when I asked what things promoted growth and what things adversely affected growth. J said loss and M said pain can help us grow. Other answers ranged from inspirational speakers to new ventures to involvement with new Christians. When we spoke about the things that retarded our growth the answers ranged from moving house to relational breakups to boredom with church to tragedies. I asked J and M if they could see how the things they mentioned for promoting positive growth could also bring negative growth to some people.



Beyond the question and answer routine, listening can tell you all sorts of things about what the people are like, where they are coming from, where you need to tread carefully and where they are comfortable. Understanding and helping people is more important than getting the right answers to the questions. It doesn’t have to be the leader’s responsibility to do this. The leader may have overall control of the pace of things but other people who are more aware of personalities and feelings can chip in during the discussion. All the people in the group have the chance to take responsibility for others, not just the leader.

An example of badly missing these personal clues can be seen at one fairly large Bible study I went to (maybe 20 people). During the study one of the young ladies started crying. This was an easy one for the leader to see but he

went on to the next question and ignored her! Everybody else was too inhibited to even comfort her. The group was known for good Bible teaching but strikingly bad in personal relationships, at least on this occasion they were.

Most meetings begin with something to eat, drink and chat about. This is a good time to listen too. Bible studies are much more than getting right answers. Listening is the key to knowing your group.

See also Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen and Rod Morris (pages 173 to 175) and Wisdom in Leadership by Craig Hamilton (chapter 38).