

One of the first Bible study groups I went to had no designated leader. This group had a dozen people or so, all about my age, male and female, and most of them were going to the same "low" Anglican church¹. A different person led the study each week. We met at different people's homes. Sometimes we studied a book of the Bible. Sometimes we studied a popular Christian book (e.g. we worked through "Knowing God" by J.I.Packer chapter by chapter.) Sometimes we did topics that each leader selected. We used to have a meal together before the study. Usually the person who lived at the home we were visiting would cook the meal, someone else would bring dessert and someone else would lead the study. We had a great time together. Personally, it re-kindled my passion for God: something that had faded since my youth group days.

To decide what we were going to study we had a discussion. Usually we would reach a consensus but if there were multiple preferred options we would decide on one and put the others off for the next series. I didn't go to the Anglican church that most of the others went to but their ministers never tried to interfere with what we were doing. We were visited twice (by a different minister) in the 5 years that I attended the group. I think that was more to enjoy our company than to check up on us. I got the impression there were a number of other Bible study groups from this church doing the same sort of thing.

The overt focus of this group was Bible study. We also prayed and enjoyed fellowship with each other. Underlying all this were strong relationships and concern for each other. Everyone had the opportunity to lead a study if they wanted to and most people had a go. Some studies went over better than others and input from the more mature Christians often lifted the study if it looked like it was crashing. We found that the person leading got the most benefit out of the study because he/she had to do more research and thinking than the people who weren't leading. So, after cycling through all the people who wanted to lead, we had most of the group taking their individual Bible study very seriously. We didn't have a leader in any sense other than the person who led the study for that week. Different people would do different things like work out a roster for the weekly location, who's cooking, who's bringing dessert and who's leading the study, or make suggestions for a night out or a weekend away or going to Handel's Messiah at Christmas or going to something at a church somewhere. No one person would initiate things, everyone could bring up ideas when they thought of them.

Colin Marshall in his book Growth Groups, chapter 10, says "Firstly, there is no such thing as a group without a leader. The leaderless group is a myth. Any form of human society or grouping will generate its own leadership if none is designated. . . . Secondly, leaderless groups are unstable. They tend to lack consistency in direction and program and are more likely to self-destruct because of a loss of motivation and unresolved tensions."

Sadly the style of running a Bible study group that I outlined at the beginning of this article has now faded out, as far as I can see. Nowadays you have one or two Bible study leaders in each group and no-one else even wants to lead. Often churches have lists of rules or "covenants" that group members and leaders are supposed to agree to (see elsewhere on this website). I've been in Bible study groups without all these rules and I found that different people in the group did all the personal stuff whether they led the group or not. We didn't need a list of obligations because you cared for each other naturally. Surely the pastoral aspects of a Bible study group should be done by everyone in the group, not just the "leader". Some people are better at certain things than other people. The "leader" is not always good at all the stuff on the list and nor should he/she be expected to be. The leader doesn't have to have all the gifts. That's why we need different people with different gifts to make up the body.

We found it beneficial to share the leadership in the group mentioned at the beginning of this article. It would be more difficult to do that with all the rules that are imposed on leaders in some churches. You could probably do it if you asked the official Bible study leader of your group and he/she would probably ask one of the ministers and then you would have to wait for permission. Shared leadership would take some of the pressure off the usual leaders (see my article on "Avoiding Burnout") because they wouldn't have to prepare so intensively every week. It would help group members too because they would share more of the responsibility and benefit from more deeply studying the Bible.

1. What I mean by church is that organisation you go to, usually on a Sunday, where you sing hymns or songs, someone reads from the Bible, someone preaches for about 30 mins, someone prays etc. – you get the idea. If "church" is a gathering of Christians (= *ekklesia*) then what we do in a Bible study group is also church but in common language it's not described that way. For the purpose of this document I will make the distinction by using "church" and "Bible study group" as completely different things.