

Leading a Small Group
Discussion on

THE
PLANS HE HAS
FOR
ME

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Introduction

The Plans He Has for Me comes pre-loaded with discussion questions and application activities, so getting started should be fairly straight-forward. However, if this is your first time leading a small group discussion, following a guide may be useful to you, as effective facilitation can enhance everyone's understanding and enjoyment of the book.

This guide aims to provide you with a structured approach to leading a discussion group studying *The Plans He Has for Me*, though they can be applied in concept to any small group setting.

How to Prepare

1. **Pray.** Ask for focus and open-minded thoughtfulness on behalf of the participants, and for wisdom and discernment for you as a group leader.
2. **Read the entire book.** Whether you choose to read it in its entirety before the first meeting of your small group, or read it chapter-by-chapter ahead of the group is up to you. Just make sure you are familiar with the content you will be discussing each week—the more prepared you are, the more smoothly the meeting will go and the more effective you will be as a discussion facilitator.
3. **Review the discussion questions.** The end of each chapter includes 2-4 questions for further consideration of the topics presented in each chapter. Remember you are not there to answer the questions, but to guide others through discovering their own answers. *Note: If you think of other discussion questions which might drive deeper conversation, by all means, add them to the list! Just make sure all questions are open-ended.*
4. **Consider the application activity.** Before each meeting, read through the “Apply It” section at the end of the chapter you’ll be discussing. If feasible, provide materials for group members to do the activity at the end of the discussion, or to take home and do later after further processing. You could also consider making the “Apply It” activity part of the group discussion.
5. **Encourage note-taking.** Participants may have thoughts they don't wish to share immediately, or things they want to contemplate on their own later, so consider inviting them to come prepared with a notebook and pen. You could also provide paper and pens for this purpose at each meeting.
6. **Remember your role.** You are a facilitator, not a teacher. Your goal is to foster safe, thoughtful conversation, which will allow for deeper connection with and understanding of God.

How to Lead the Discussion

The topics being addressed in this book are personal and discussion of them requires vulnerability. It's your job to foster this safe space and empower everyone within it to contribute in a positive, productive way. Whether you're gathering online or in a home, café, or classroom, here are some best practice guidelines to consider as you prepare for each meeting.

1. **Establish discussion guidelines.** At the start of your first meeting, set some ground rules to ensure a respectful and inclusive experience.
 - a. Active listening
 - b. Self-expression without interruption
 - c. Respecting diverse views and experiences
 - d. Avoiding unhelpful tangents
 - e. Confidentiality - What is shared in the small group stays in the small group (unless there is risk of someone harming themselves or others).
2. **Encourage participation from everyone.** Ensure everyone present has an opportunity to share their thoughts and insights, and make sure to affirm their contributions. Be aware you may need to actively prevent certain group members from dominating the conversation. (This includes you!)
3. **Stay focused.** It's easy for groups to get derailed if they are not following an effective guide. If your group starts wandering into the weeds in their discussion, gently lead them back to the appropriate path.
4. **Rephrase comments for clarity.** For example: "What I hear you saying is..." Then give them a chance to confirm or correct what you heard.
5. **Get comfortable with silence.** Breaks in conversation are normal; don't rush to fill them. This is time for participants to process, internalize, and determine how and what to share next.
6. **Manage time effectively.** One of the quickest ways to lose group members is to demonstrate a lack of value of their time. Make sure to allocate sufficient time for each discussion question and allow for dynamic and engaging conversation, but be mindful of the clock and be sure to end on time.
7. **Do a wrap-up.** As the end of your scheduled meeting time draws near, close the discussion with a brief summary of key takeaways and questions for further personal exploration.
8. **Confirm the next meeting.** Before everyone leaves, make sure to confirm the date, time, and location of your next meeting, as well as which chapter you will be discussing.

How to Lead an Online Discussion

Online meetings require a slightly different approach to etiquette, so in addition to the guidelines above, consider the following:

1. **Videos on.** To foster the connections desired through this small group, ask that everyone leave their video on for the duration of the meeting.
2. **Mics muted.** To avoid distracting background noise and echoes, ask that participants mute their mic when they are not speaking.
3. **Use the hand-raise feature.** If someone has something to say, ask that they use the hand-raise feature to indicate their desire to share so that no one is interrupted or overlooked.

How to Lead a Multi-Generational Discussion

Part of the purpose of this book is to bring together people of all ages, to allow for greater understanding across generations. The editors encourage you to consider a cross-generational small group with the goal of increased understanding and acceptance from all participants. Though this can be daunting and challenging, here are some suggestions to make it run a little smoother.

1. **Foster dialogue.** Ask questions to bridge the generation gap. For example, ask older participants to share how the chapter's content resonated with them or not, and what questions came up for them as they read it. Ask younger participants how they relate to the chapter's topic in their own experience—whether different or similar—to address any questions posed by the older participants.
2. **Respect differences.** Acknowledge that this is not a group to create consensus on a topic, but simply to discuss, share, and contemplate as a community topics which are important to young adults today. Differences of opinions and experiences are inevitable, and that's okay. Create an inclusive environment in which everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions without fear of judgment.

How to Incorporate the Appendix

The appendix of *The Plans He Has for Me* includes a list of over 40 questions collected from hundreds of young adults across the U.S. and Canada. They are not listed in any particular order, but the twelve questions addressed in the body of the book were drawn from the recurring themes of these questions.

Bottom line: These are important, valuable questions being asked by a large number of young adults. Some of these young adults are still tied to the Adventist church; some are not. Some will make a decision based on the answers they find to these questions.

Once you've gone through the book itself, you may find your group wishes to continue diving deep into the "tough stuff." That's where this appendix comes in. Below are some suggestions on how to proceed with your small group study, utilizing the content of the appendix.

1. **Use a secret ballot.** Have the members of your group choose their top five questions from the list and email them to you in ranked order of interest. Tally the winners and create a list of the next five questions you'll discuss as a group.
2. **Identify a discussion leader for each topic.** Ask for volunteers to lead the discussion for each question you will be discussing. It is best if you as group leader take the first topic to a) set an example for discussion format, and b) give the other members additional time to put together their notes, thoughts, and questions.
3. **Start by sharing.** Whoever leads the discussion each time should open with their own perspective, perhaps adding other related questions they've had to further enhance the conversation and give the others additional ideas to which they can respond. Starting with one's own thoughts on the topic also breaks the ice and sets the tone for a comfortable and safe conversation.
4. **Keep things moving & focused.** Like with the chapter discussions, make sure you as group leader are prepared to keep any one person from monopolizing the discussion or letting the conversation drift into the weeds.

If you are meeting with a multi-generational group, consider having two people plan to co-lead the discussion—each from a different generation. They can work together on their topic, or they can each bring content from which they will share the lead.

Theoretically, you could continue in this fashion until you've discussed all questions listed in the appendix. You could also have members of the group suggest their own questions. Regardless of how you structure your group as it evolves into a cohort of community, emphasizing that *God can handle our questions* is crucial.

Sample Meeting Structure

The length of your meeting will depend largely on the size of your group. For effective small group engagement, we recommend no more than 8-10 participants, and no less than 90 minutes. This ensures the conversation is not rushed and that everyone will both have time and feel comfortable sharing. If you are sharing a meal together, expect an additional 30 minutes of socializing prior to the start of the meeting, and schedule accordingly.

Welcome (2 minutes)

Opening prayer (2 minutes)

Content and discussion (80-90 minutes)

Summary of key points (5 minutes)

Reminders/closing remarks (2 minutes)

For online groups: Launch the meeting 10-15 minutes before start time. Be there to greet people as they arrive.

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