

# MIGHTY OAK MINISTRIES



*They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:3)*



*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

*Rom. 12:3-5*



## ✧ THE CHALLENGE OF CHALLENGING PEOPLE

BY PAT J. SIKORA

Challenging people. Wounded people. Dysfunctional people.

Each year we find more of these in the church, creating a challenge for small group leaders. A regular small group in the church might have one or two of these people, in which case the leaders can buy and read my book, *Why Didn't You Warn Me? How to Deal with Challenging Group Members*. But what do you do with a whole group of people who are so wounded that they don't conform to the "norms" we expect in small groups?

Awhile back, a woman I was discipling was invited to *not* join a recovery group she had signed up for. I'm not surprised. She was a challenge and the leader didn't have a clue what to do with her! But the rejection only added to her wounding, so I invited her and three other challenging women to form a group specifically designed to teach them how to be part of a small group.

As I've led groups of severely wounded women, I've learned several keys about what works and what doesn't.

**Mighty Oak Ministries** [www.mightyoakministries.com](http://www.mightyoakministries.com)

165 Atherwood Avenue Redwood City, CA 94061 (650) 364-0127 [Pat@mightyoakministries.com](mailto:Pat@mightyoakministries.com)



# Seven Steps to Serve Challenging People

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## 1. Be clear and open when inviting participants:

Many wounded people already have had problems being part of a group, whether Christian or secular. They already feel ostracized. So I'm pretty open when I choose to lead a group of challenging people. I let them know that, in addition to Bible study, we will be developing good group skills. Most people are open to this.



## 2. Keep it small:

A skilled leader might be able to lead a group of six to ten members, but when dealing with challenging people, limit it to four. It's OK. It'll feel like ten! You want plenty of time to do the study and to process group issues. Plus, you can expect numerous distractions, which will reduce your effectiveness.

## 3. Agree to the rules in advance:

I like to use a group covenant that members read, discuss, and sign. This covenant will include meeting time, attendance and punctuality expectations, discussion limitations, goals, confidentiality requirements, boundaries, and anything else you expect to be an issue. Members need to clearly understand your expectations and also to share theirs. (You can get a sample at <http://whydidntyouwarnme.com/resources/>)





#### 4. Stress Attendance and punctuality:

It's important to be clear about your expectations for both attendance and punctuality. Challenging people always have something come up. Their car breaks down, their kids get sick, they get sick, their favorite TV program is on . . . They need to understand that their absence creates hole in the group. They also need to understand that arriving late or leaving early is disruptive. Start the group on time, regardless of who is there and try very hard to end on time, regardless of how much is left to cover. Sometimes it's helpful to schedule the first 15 to 20 minutes for visiting, but clarify when members are expected to arrive and when the study or worship will begin. Talk about attendance and punctuality often and affirm those who make improvements.



One challenging group I led several years ago had a covenant for attendance and in ten weeks, ten people, we had only one absence! When that one person missed a meeting, everyone saw how important each was to the group dynamics. With only four people in the group, attendance is even more important.

*Be devoted to one another  
in brotherly love. Honor one  
another above yourselves.  
Rom. 12:10*

While encouraging people to attend consistently and arrive on time, be realistic and learn to flex. This population will probably have a lot of attendance and punctuality issues.

#### 5. Discuss group processes:

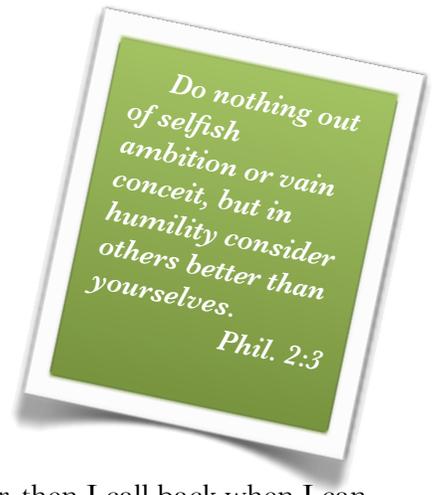
In a group of challenging people, you will have some who talk all the time and others who won't open their mouths. It's important to discuss group expectations in advance, then provide reminders when it becomes necessary. Set the tone by being lovingly open with both the talkers and the observers. Feel free to cut off the person who never takes a breath and to call on the quiet one. Use humor and be frank. You might even use a minute

timer and agree in advance that each comment will go no longer than the time allowed. Just like in a board game, it's OK to call "time!" Praise the quiet one for speaking longer than last time.

This may be the most difficult leadership skill of all. Challenging people often are lonely and when they have someone to listen, many will go on and on—and on. It takes real grace to lovingly cut off a member over and over—and over without zoning out. But in the end, they will be grateful.

## 6. Set boundaries:

Since many challenging people are lonely and in need of friends, they may want to become your new best friend. You need to decide if that's your goal. I set moderately firm boundaries, telling members that I only answer the telephone when it's convenient, and that I may not be able to spend a lot of time on the phone. I make sure members understand that my family requires much of my time and is my priority. Then if I'm spending time with family, I don't answer the phone. I let voicemail answer, then I call back when I can. If I have limited time, I tell the caller immediately, then try hard to stick to that limit. Challenging people always have a crisis. They always need to talk. I need to give up my Messiah complex and remember that they reached their present age without me and will probably live many more years without my undivided attention.



## 7. Enforce confidentiality:

As with any group, confidentiality is essential. You'll hear amazing stories and it will be tempting to share with family and friends. Don't. Even challenging people need to know that their private lives are private. Enforce confidentiality in the group, as well, dealing with breeches immediately and firmly.

Leading a group of challenging people can be, well—challenging. But you'll be glad you did. They are delightful, and watching them grow will be the most enriching experience you've had in a long time!

