

# QUICK-START GUIDE FOR SIMPLE CHURCHES

by Bob Sears

*“I understand why; I just need some help with how.”*

*“We get the big idea but we’re not sure where to begin.”*

Statements like those express a frustration shared by many who want to launch a simple church. They’re not looking for anything so canned as “church in a box.” What they’re after is some practical, try-this-next suggestions to start them off and steer them straight. That’s what this pamphlet is designed to provide. Drawn from years of experience with dozens of groups in a wide variety of settings, it offers a customizable approach covering several essentials for a great group.

## STEPS TO TAKE BEFORE YOU MEET

**STEP 1** - Pray awhile about who, then invite some people to meet together once in a neutral setting (like a home, coffee shop, park, available room, etc.) for a set amount of time (like 90 minutes). One reason for gathering that regularly strikes a responsive chord is that many people nowadays are disillusioned or uncomfortable with organized religion. They still believe in God and are interested in what the Bible teaches, but they don’t want to sit down and shut up while someone tells them what to believe. They would prefer a setting where people could respectfully share and learn about each other’s spiritual journey, where Scripture could be discussed and questions asked by novices without having to feel stupid, where disagreements would be friendly and no one would feel pressured to accept something they aren’t ready for. An invitation to a group like that sounds extremely positive and interesting to all sorts of people.

**STEP 2** - Growing a great group often requires a skilled leader or facilitator on hand to assist, at least for awhile. Just be careful not to hastily approve someone for that role who loves to direct, teach, tell and answer most of the questions. They’ll stifle your group’s interactions and rob people of opportunities to feel responsible and take initiative. You need a humble soul with a biblical understanding of what churches should “look like” when they’re in top-notch condition, a coach who is devoted to helping the group progress toward that vision as a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” It should be someone who seeks to influence by noticing what’s going on and making brief observations, asking open-ended questions, offering timely suggestions and encouraging everyone to participate. If no one with these “qualifications” is available to fill the role, the second-best choice is to divvy it up among the group members who are willing to volunteer. Or accept the offer mentioned at the end of Step 6, below.

## STEPS FOR YOUR FIRST AND SECOND MEETINGS

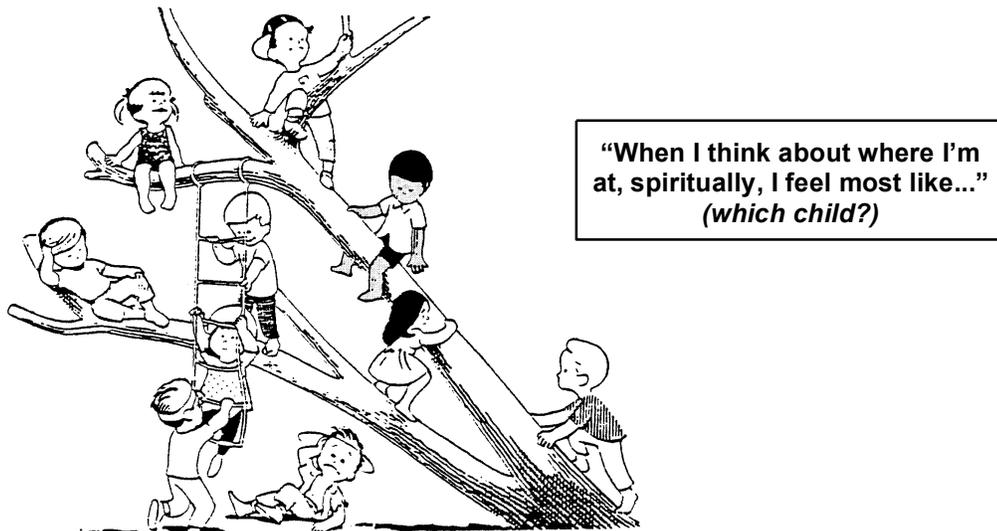
**STEP 3** - Little of value will be accomplished in your group as long as people remain uneasy, guarded or superficial with each other. They need to quickly establish a sense of safety where transparency can flourish. Good ideas that can help with this include beginning your meetings with a casual social time, eating a meal together and/or working through some pre-planned interaction exercises. Here are three that consistently work well and can be used in your first two or three meetings:

- **GOOD FOR MEETING #1:** Ask everyone to describe briefly their spiritual history or experiences with God/church/religion.
- **GOOD FOR MEETING #2:** In groups of three or four (which can reorganize after each segment of four statements), have everyone complete the following sentences. Notice that the third and fourth segments get progressively deeper and more spiritual, so end with them.

Three "Interaction Exercises" - continued:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Some day I would like to...</li> <li>2. One of my favorite trips was to...</li> <li>3. Three words that describe me pretty well are...</li> <li>4. My current family situation is...</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. A bit of advice I'd give to someone younger is...</li> <li>10. My parents were...</li> <li>11. An accomplishment I'm proud of is...</li> <li>12. Growing up in my family was...</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. What I like to do in my spare time is...</li> <li>6. My favorite kind of literature is...</li> <li>7. One thing I really value in life is...</li> <li>8. Something I really admire in another person is...</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. I think of Jesus Christ as...</li> <li>14. If I could ask God one question, I would ask...</li> <li>15. I would describe heaven as...</li> <li>16. One thing about God I especially appreciate is...</li> </ol>

- GOOD FOR MEETING #3: Ask everyone to explain their answer to the following question.



Before you conclude your *first* session together, make sure the group is clear about its purpose (like helping each other get to know God better in a safe, informal setting) and how you'll be spending your time together. Everyone then needs to agree on how many times they are committed to meet together (before re-evaluating), when, and for how long each time (probably between two and three hours, especially if you share a meal).

**SIDE-STEP** - Before you get past your first couple of meetings, you'll need to take stock of who's showing up. If a majority are still unbelievers, it won't make much sense to proceed as though they're a church. In that case, they will need to focus on helping each other work through the beliefs, questions, objections and misunderstandings that keep them from knowing and selling-out to God.<sup>1</sup> Bear in mind that biblical literacy is rare nowadays, so read and discuss whole sections of Scripture together (a small portion at a time to keep everyone on the same point). Here are some questions to stimulate productive interactions:

- What does that passage tell you about people or life that you can identify with?
- What does that passage tell you about God (or Jesus)?
- How would you state the main idea(s) or point(s) of that passage in your own words?
- What does that passage teach that applies to you, and what difference do you think God wants it to make in your life?

<sup>1</sup> You may want to consult a resource like Garry Poole's terrific book, *Seeker Small Groups*. It contains over two decades of practical wisdom on how to guide people in a group toward faith in Christ.

One strategic place to start reading together is the seven “miracle stories” in John’s gospel. These provide a stereotype-busting introduction to Jesus and what it means to follow him. Other good options include accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection, certain parables, the Lord’s prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. Step 3 and beyond won’t work well for you until your group is comprised mostly of Christians, so keep your aim on that target until it is. It may take awhile.

**STEP 4** - After you’ve completed your social time/ meal and another of the interaction exercises described in Step 3 (or after you’ve hit the “Side-Step” target described above), focus right away on empowering everyone present to accept responsibility for the group’s spiritual growth and overall quality. One of the absolute-best practices a simple church can establish to make this happen is “Open Sharing” at (nearly) every meeting. The New Testament basis for doing this is summarized in the three points, below. Read and discuss them for a short while before doing the same with Step 5. You’ll probably need 40-60 minutes to finish, so plan ahead.

- **POINT #1:** Every person receives the Holy Spirit at the moment they surrender in faith to Jesus.

*Acts 2:38 “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 (This) promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

*Romans 8:9 “You...are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”*

*2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test?”*

*1 Corinthians 6:19a “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”*

**SUMMARY OF POINT #1:** *Every Christian has the Holy Spirit.*

- **POINT #2:** At the moment they surrender in faith to Jesus, the Holy Spirit incorporates and integrates every new believer into the “Body of Christ” as a living member. We are dynamically linked to millions of others in a functioning and coordinated system that requires all of us to depend on each other and work together.

*1 Corinthians 12:12 “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..., and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ...21 The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 27 Now you (all together) are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”*

**SUMMARY OF POINT #2:** *Every Christian is part of Christ’s Body.*

“The N.T. Basis for Open Sharing” – continued:

- **POINT #3:** As “connected” members of Christ’s Body, every believer has an essential part to play in assisting and influencing the others. We must never discount the importance of our God-assigned role.

1 Corinthians 12:14 “Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. 15 If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”

1 Corinthians 12:7 “Now to each one (of us) the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

Ephesians 4:16 “From Jesus the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Think now. From where do we, God’s people, get what we need in order to keep growing toward spiritual maturity? (*Hint – The answer is there in the first two words of the last verse.*)

We get all of it “from Jesus.” And how does Jesus impart to us what we need in order to keep growing?

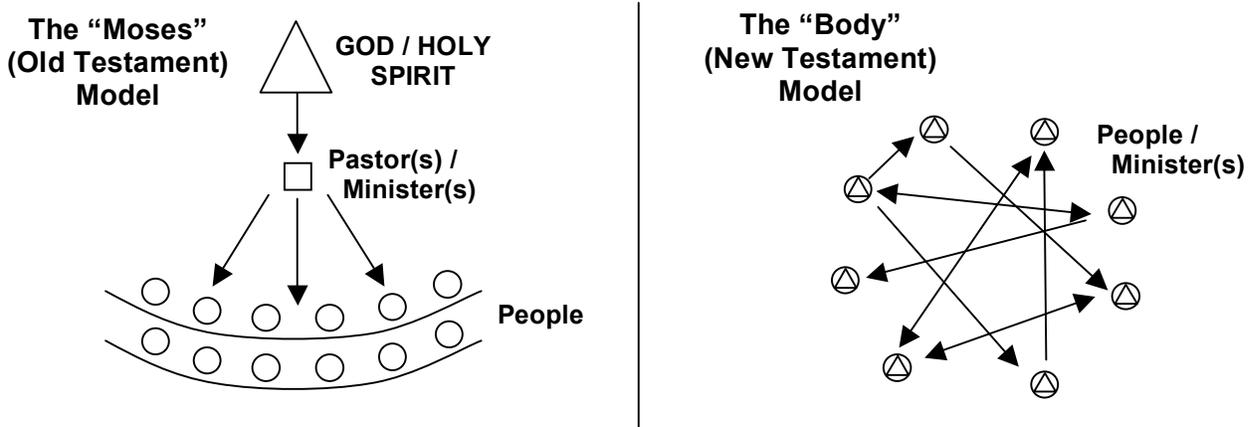
Not just directly in our one-on-one relationship with Him, as many Christians imagine. It primarily comes through what we give to *each other*! Re-read the same verse with a little re-working for clarity and emphasis:

**“The whole body with all of its parts gets all that it needs to grow and build itself up as each part cares enough for the others to participate as it was designed to. It won’t if they don’t.”**

In other words, we don’t grow solo. God dispenses most of the essential nutrients we all need *through each other*. That’s how he designed us to function as a body .

**SUMMARY OF POINT #3: Every Christian Is needed by Christ’s Body.**

It seems clear from these three biblical points that God intends churches to be set up *less* like the illustration on the left and *more* like the one on the right.



More needs to be said about the critical role of church leaders and pastors, but that goes beyond the scope of this pamphlet as a Quick-Start Guide. For now, take a few minutes to discuss the ideas you just read. When you’re finished, read and discuss Step 5, below, before you conclude this session. The goal of that Step is to secure a commitment from everyone present to do what it describes *before* they arrive at your next meeting.

## FOR THE END OF YOUR SECOND MEETING AND PREPARATION FOR YOUR THIRD

**STEP 5** - So far we have established a solid basis for Open Sharing as a church. The idea is to set up something for ourselves like what many early believers enjoyed, a kind of face-to-face interaction that the Holy Spirit can use to bless us all:

*1 Corinthians 14:26 "Here's what I want you to do. When you gather together, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight. All of these must be offered for the strengthening of the others" (The Message, Eugene Petersen).*

*Hebrews 10:24 "Let us consider ('reflect on / contemplate / think carefully about') how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."*

This step explains how each person can collaborate in advance with God to **PREPARE** a unique contribution for their next church gathering, a "spiritual gift" selected for its potential to affect them in Jesus' name. In a nutshell, it involves following **INSTRUCTIONS AND GUIDELINES** like these (or others you may prefer):

- (1) To begin with, don't fret over not yet having any ideas of what you might share. Just do this: sometime between now and your next meeting, spend 10-or-so minutes alone with the Lord. Ask Him what you could say or do that would bless the others in your group and see what comes to mind. Think about something God recently used to touch your heart, as it may very well do the same for others. Then, if necessary, take some time to "wrap" the gift so it's ready to give.
- (2) You may prepare to share something as an individual or with one (or more) others.
- (3) Feel free to be simple or creative, serious or fun. Just focus on making it meaningful, something that will encourage progress in people's relationship with God and each other.
- (4) Don't worry about being detailed or polished in your "presentation." Open Sharing is not about putting you on display. It's about giving God an opportunity to bless those He loves through you. Count on taking only five or six minutes to share, then leaving a few minutes for others to respond. If you go much longer, someone who prepared probably won't get to share. (NOTE - The optimal size for Open Sharing is around 8-12 participants. If you have 14-16+, it may be best to split into two or more groups.)
- (5) Here are some specific "gift" possibilities you might find helpful as you're trying to decide what to prepare. (Everyone in the church should have a copy of these they can refer to.)

### Two Basic Kinds Of Gifts You Can Bring<sup>2</sup> -

- A **Vertical** gift is directed to *God* and designed to include others in honoring *Him*. It may be a song, prayer, praise, thanksgiving, testimonial of what He's done, psalm, letter of appreciation, poem, etc.
- A **Horizontal** gift is offered directly to *others* and is designed to edify *them*. It may be a lesson you've learned, a passage of Scripture (with a personal application), an insight, message, teaching, testimony, challenge, exhortation, correction, encouragement, material gift, song, skit or dramatic presentation, question you'd like to pose, prayer, personal need or burden, request, confession of sin, prayer request, etc. (These last several are gifts from a heart that is willing to share the unmasked you and one of the best gifts you have to offer.)

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Jim Rutz for hacking through the underbrush on this topic to expose a similar path in his book, *The Open Church*.

## STEPS FOR YOUR THIRD AND SUBSEQUENT MEETINGS

**STEP 6** - You may want to use the beginning of your third meeting to enjoy another meal or interaction exercise. Just remember that a sizeable chunk of time (about an hour for a group of eight) is needed for everyone to “gift” the group with what they prepared.

- Right away it’s vital to acknowledge the Lord as lovingly, powerfully present among you, so encourage several to pray as you begin (rather than having just one person praying on everyone else’s behalf).
- Mention that participants needn’t jump-in to “take their turn” as soon as the previous person finishes. This isn’t a talent show. Encourage them instead to pay close attention and respond to each other as the Spirit leads before moving on to the next person. What one shares will often set the stage for related comments, clarifying or probing questions, personalized prayer, a word of gratitude, a thought from Scripture and so on. An extended pause of silence will typically signal that the group is ready for what the next person has prepared.
- All it usually takes to start the Open Sharing segment is to ask who would like to go first.

**STEP 7** - One practice that almost guarantees your Open Sharing times will become increasingly sweet and powerful is to schedule a “Debrief/Evaluation” for 10-20 minutes at the end of each one. Here are some useful questions to pose to the group:

- What did you like best about that sharing time? What made it good or helped it along?
- What did you notice that didn’t seem to work very well or caused a problem?
- What would you suggest to make our next sharing time even better?
- Was anything missing from our sharing time that a balanced and healthy church needs? If so, how can we ensure that we get more of it in the future?

It may encourage people to be more frank if they’re allowed to write their answers on pieces of paper which are then collected and read aloud as anonymous.

If creating time to do all this means some folks don’t get to share what they prepared, ask them to save it for another time. Debriefs are *essential* because they help group members to step outside of themselves for a few minutes, observe what happened in light of their (and God’s) expectations, voice dislikes before they have a chance to fester and suggest adjustments before imbalances get ingrained.

**STEP 8** - Once Open Sharing and Debriefing become established components in your gatherings, they will provide a regular time to explore, debate, practice and refine your church’s experience with *other* essentials for growing a spiritually vital church. These may include more focus on Jesus and becoming like Him, expressing praise/gratitude to Him, agreed-upon guidelines to help the group interact smoothly, more/better Bible study or prayer or emphasis on outreach, leadership development and so on.<sup>3</sup> Each can be introduced when it becomes clear to someone that it’s needed. As Step 2 explained, having a skillful Coach on hand to facilitate (at least part of) this process can be invaluable. Much of their job is to observe what the group lacks, then offer clear and empowering guidance without taking over. If you discover that you could use some help like that at any stage of your growth, use the contact information at the end of the footnote, below, and we’ll rush some your way.

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<sup>3</sup> Ten such essentials are highlighted with biblical explanations and practical recommendations in the book *Gold, Silver and Precious Stones – How to Build and Extraordinary Church*, by Bob Sears. In fact, the information in these pages was mostly drawn from that resource. It is available on the Products and Resources page of this website: [www.simple-minded.net](http://www.simple-minded.net)