Polarity Management
* The principles of Polarity Management suggest that in every area of life we must learn to manage the tension between two good things rather than chose one thing over another.
* There are many polarities in the Kingdom of God.
* Instead of looking for right answers and nice little definitions, sometimes it’s better to identify and manage the tensions that exist between two desirable truths or outcomes.
* Managing tension keeps things in balance. Very often you’ll find there are no right answers to some problems that arise in SGs – just several good values and practices that you’re trying to balance.
* These tensions can be addressed in the form of a continuum that represent the pull you feel when standing in the middle. SGs cannot thrive by focusing on either end of the continuum. Rather, effective life-giving SGs must embrace both ends of the continuum, in healthy opposition, and walk the tightrope toward authentic community and life change.

The Learning Challenge: Balancing Truth and Life
* Should we focus on content, the right understanding of the Scripture text, gaining the right information? Or should we spend more time helping members with personal issues, asking them to look closely at their lives and being real about their needs and problems?

| Truth | Life |

* An emphasis on truth without life will turn you into a Pharisee. And a life that’s not informed by truth will make you a relativist “blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Eph. 4:14).
* SGs that emphasize life are rooted in experience rather than in an outside source of objective reality. But an excessive absorption in each other’s lives leads to an aversion to allowing truth to shape life. These groups might have meaningful prayer, activities, and community but lack a scriptural center that functions as a compass to inform decisions and ward off error.
* Spiritual transformation occurs when truth meets life and must be the outcome of any group.

| Truth | Spiritual Transformation | Life |

* The learning challenge is about truth that engages life and produces spiritual growth in the community of Christ followers.
* SG leaders can create an interactive, dynamic environment for truth-life encounters by:
  1. Connecting Scripture with story. Groups grow when Scripture and story collide with member’s lives, demanding that they shape their ongoing story in conformity with God’s story, becoming more like Christ in the process.
2. Turn questions into discussions. The purpose of a question in a SG is to create a discussion. Open-ended questions invite insights, opinions, and personal reflection. Make questions focused and personal. For truth to meet life, the SG has to move from general content to more personal questions.

3. Vary learning styles. Some people are readers, some are listeners, some doers, and some are watchers.

4. Practice active listening. When we really listen – with our ears and with our eyes – we can seize holy moments by recognizing that God is at work and the Holy Spirit has just grabbed the agenda. Be alert to situations that may signal a change of heart, conviction of sin, or a comfort-zone disruption such as: a change in the mood of the group; body language and facial expressions; tone of voice; or change in habits or behaviors.

* As you carefully walk the truth-life tightrope you will develop a spiritual transformation-focused group, in which members diligently seek to know the truth, not just about themselves, but about God as well. The focus is on how the truth about God connects with the truth about each life in the circle, as members strive together to promote growth and change.

* If you’re weak on the truth end of the continuum, try selecting a new curriculum that has a life-changing focus, one that would engage people in wrestling with biblical truth.

* If your group is weak on the life end of the continuum, you’ll want to increase their awareness of the Holy Spirit and be sensitive to what God is doing among the members.

The Development Challenge: Balancing Care and Discipleship

* This tension arises in the mind of the SG leader, who as a shepherd of the group, must constantly balance the nurturing, caring requirements with the responsibility to challenge people in other areas of growth (like spiritual disciplines and evangelistic activity).

* SGs that focus on only the disciplines of discipleship tend to attract the strong and prepare soldiers for battle. SGs that spend an inordinate amount of energy on caregiving tend to focus on the needs of the weak and hurting, providing a strong sense of family for them. Both are essential, however, the challenge is to accomplish both in the context of SG life.

* When a leader creates an environment that is both caring and developmental he/she is practicing “intentional shepherding.”

* Every SG must determine their bias on the development continuum. The following paradigm is helpful:
Most SGs begin at the lower left quadrant, simply connecting people to our little community. An incomplete view of discipleship tends to create a teaching and instructional environment, moving towards the upper left quadrant. The care champions will tend to drift toward the lower right, creating a nurturing feel. A balanced SG leaders will set goals to intentionally create a shepherding atmosphere.

An intentional shepherding process will involve four steps: building relationships, assessing needs, developing a plan, and monitoring progress.

The Relational Challenge: Balancing Friendship and Accountability

Too much accountability can reduce friendship building to a task or a project. And too many superficial friendships will drain the desire for growth from members who long to be challenged and known in deep, caring ways.

People need accountability in order to grow and be stretched, to fulfill responsibilities and meet new challenges. And people long for genuine friendships to share life with others. But relationship heavy on accountability won’t last if there is never any fun.

Accountability, built on trust and in tandem with love, turns connection into community, moving people from surface friendships to authentic relationships.

There are five gateways that every SG must pass through in order to produce authentic relationships:

1. Self-disclosure. If vulnerability doesn’t emerge with increasing frequency, you can’t love, serve, admonish, or celebrate one another in community. Self-disclosure earns us the right to speak truth into each other’s lives.
3. Mutual support. When members in the SG experience crisis, the group begins to anticipate needs and seeks to help in tangible ways.
4. Truth telling. Admonition is to correct or rebuke and is used in a relationship to point out destructive behaviors or attitudes. To both correct and encourage, admonition must be shared with grace, tact, and emotional intelligence.
5. Affirmation. The group is aware and celebrates growth and maturity in one another.
The Reconciliation Challenge: Balancing Kindness and Confrontation
* Pursuing relational integrity in an environment in which truth meets life will inevitably lead to relational friction. SG members will tend to respond to problems with either kindness or confrontation. Both are biblical responses that a group must practice.

* The challenge is to bring kindness and confrontation together in healthy conflict. If a group can move through conflict in a biblical way, they will experience true unity.

* In order to engage in healthy conflict resolution a SG should recognize factors that contribute to problems such as: SG developmental stages; relational unawareness; Extra Care Required people; or interpersonal tensions.
* When conflict arises, a SG leader should take the opportunity to point his/her group to Scripture to teach them conflict resolution principles and skills.

The Impact Challenge: Balancing Task and People
* This tension lies between two concerns: “How do we get people in our SG to get out and serve somewhere?” and “We get so caught up with serving and getting the task done, that there’s no time for building community.”

* Both are important. Serving is essential to the Christian maturity process, but relationships are central to spiritual growth as well. The ultimate problem for serving groups is that when task and community building compete, the task always wins. The job must get done. Community focused groups face the challenge of not seeing the value of service because community life gives a sense of fulfillment.
* When groups begin serving together, the result is a high-impact force for increasing the quality of the task and the depth of relationships.

* Serving groups can improve community building through serving together in a number of ways:
  1. Helping people discover basic fellowship and explore introductory spiritual development. They can be entry-level groups for connecting people in community.
2. Maximizing the “be with” factor. To “be with” people along the way means catching moments of community with one another while they serve together.
3. Special occasions can be utilized for building community. These include birthdays, anniversaries, special dinners, and retreats.
4. View the SG as one step contributing to the discipleship journey. It is the combination of many communities and people that brings people to spiritual maturity and develops Christian character.
5. Be prayerful. Prayer is a great way to build relationships because it is the context in which they share their lives and witness God’s work through his answers. Pray before or after the task; pray along the way; pray between meetings; pray over the phone.

The Connection Challenge: Balancing Openness and Intimacy

* Unless SGs maintain a willingness to welcome new members many people in the church will not have the opportunity to connect with Christian community. However, meaningful relationships require intimacy. You cannot have intimacy without confidentiality and trust. And it seems difficult to build trust when the group is open. * When intimacy and openness collide, intimacy usually wins.

* Christ’s purposes demand that his intimate community have a cause beyond itself. This combination of intimacy and openness allows people to experience God’s design for people in the body – inclusive community.

* There are five dynamics that keep groups from extending the hand of community to outsiders:

1. **Hoardings.** We naturally tend to build walls around community to protect it. Often this tendency relates to the busyness of life. We have little extra time to build relationships with more people.
2. **Stagnation.** Every group drifts toward becoming ingrown. They miss what new members offer – fresh vision, other spiritual gifts, innovative perspectives, and new talents and abilities. Closed groups tend to get self-centered and lose vision.
3. **Mobility.** People in our culture are on the move to new jobs and geographic locations. But there will always be mobility because people connect at different places in different eras of their spiritual growth and changes in how they serve all through their Christian lives.
4. **Natural relationship.** SGs should grow through the natural development of relationships in networks at work, in the neighborhood, and in the family. The best growth occurs in the ordinary course of relational rhythms.
5. **Legacy.** Consider how many lives may be impacted by adding just one person to a group.
Discussion:

What “tension” seems to challenge you and your ministry the most?

Share an example of how a SG has wrestled through one of these tensions and grown together as a result.

Is it possible to rescue a SG that has already become ingrown? Why or why not?

Case study and subgroup work on pages 181-185. “The Development Challenge”

1. How should the group respond to the Petersons’ situation? (in and outside the meetings)
2. What attitudes should the leaders model and expect the group to embrace?
3. What role should boundaries play in a situation like this?
4. How should the church staff or ministry leaders be involved, if at all?
5. What can group members expect on a regular basis when it comes to Scripture, prayer, growth and community?
6. Can group curriculum play a role in this situation?