



Welcome Aboard!

Creating a Culture of
Biblical Hospitality in Groups

Welcome Aboard! Conference Plan

This conference plan is designed for all group leaders from all age groups to be together for a time of training. The booklet's three chapters focus on one area of ministry each: Kids, Students, and Adults.

One option is to provide the booklet in print or PDF form to your group leaders before the training, asking them to read the entire booklet. Principles from each chapter will apply in all age groups, so reading the entire booklet has benefits for all leaders regardless of the age group with which they work.

Another way to conduct training is to direct Kids' leaders read the chapter written just for them (chapter 1), while student leaders and adult leaders read only the chapters that relate to their ministry area (chapters 2 and 3, respectively).

This conference plan is based on a journey through each of the three chapters.

Copies of *Welcome Aboard!* Can be found at lifeway.com/trainingresources.

Getting Ready to Lead

Checklist of supplies and to-dos:

- Copies of *Welcome Aboard!* Ordered or downloaded.
- Snacks and drinks
- Name tags and markers
- Pens
- Training placed on church calendar.
- Room for training reserved.
- Promotional items developed (brochures, flyers, PDFs, etc)
- Group leaders personally invited to the training.
- A/V equipment requested.
- Create media presentation based on plans if desired (optional)

Before participants arrive:

- Place one copy of *Welcome Aboard!* at each person's seat or on the tables.
- Place several large markers on each table (for writing names on name tags)
- Place a pen and a name tag at each person's place.
- Connect your laptop and check all A/V connections.
- Set the room temperature at a comfortable level.
- Set out snacks and drinks on a table.
- Begin playing music in the background as people arrive.
- Prepare to welcome each person, directing them to a seat or table where they will make a nametag and find a copy of *Welcome Aboard!*

Conference Plan – All Group Leaders Together (90 minutes)

15 minutes – Welcome/Introduce Training Theme

- Invite attendees to print their names on the name tags you have provided using the large markers on each table.
- Thank attendees for coming to the training.
- Using the *High Seas, High Touch* section on page 4 of the *Welcome Aboard!* book, and the *High Hopes, Low Touch* section that follows it, tell the story of the book's origin and the author's experience when trying to connect with groups.
- Invite participants to share stories of occasions when they received outstanding service somewhere (restaurant, business, etc). Ask participants to share their experiences with the people seated at their tables.
- Using the section of the book titled *The Purpose of This Book* (page 7) explain what you want to accomplish because of this training event.
- Pray and ask God to help you and every group leader to provide excellent experiences for each guest who visits the groups in your church's Bible teaching ministry, and to lead their group members to be more sensitive than ever before to the guests whom God brings to your church.

15 minutes – Through the Eyes of Your Guests

- **Call attention** to the first two paragraphs on page 10 of *Welcome Aboard!* and read the paragraphs aloud to the group.
 - “Think about a time you were a new person in a new setting but felt like an outsider. Perhaps it was a new neighborhood, a new job, or a new church. Did you know anyone? Did you feel welcomed? Did you feel people genuinely cared? Being in a new setting can be difficult. For most of us who have attended the same church for years, it's easy to forget the perspective of being a new person in a new setting.”
- **Ask:** *Can you identify with being the new person in a new setting?* Encourage participants to tell their stories and what they felt like, and how they were helped by others to feel included.
- **Ask:** *What emotions might a guest experience when they come to the church for the first time? What might cause a guest to feel uncomfortable when they come to a Bible study group for the first time?* (List responses on a marker board or a large wall-size POST-IT Note).
- **Identify** examples of ways that groups and group leaders *intentionally* make guests feel welcomed at your church. Call for responses and be affirming of effective ways that your church's group leaders and members are helping guests feel welcomed.

- If group leaders struggle to list ways they help guests feel welcomed, provide a few answers of your own, telling the group this is why the church is providing this training – to help all leaders and group members be more sensitive to the experiences the guests have while visiting your church.

15 Minutes – Early is on Time

- **Say:** *A guest's experience can be awkward for a number of reasons, but it can be even more awkward when a group leader is not in the classroom when the guest first arrives.*
- **Invite** participants to read the section “Arrive Early and be Prepared” on page 12 of *Welcome Aboard!*.
 - *“Arrive early and be prepared. In this case, “early” is before the first child arrives, not the time the group is scheduled to start. “On time is late and early is on time” should be the adage of every leader in kids’ ministry. Make sure the learning environment, including all supplies, is ready. When you arrive early and are prepared for the arrival of the first child, you can focus on welcoming the children into your classroom and building relationships with them. When you’re well-prepared for the teaching session, biblical hospitality can take place. Your actions communicate to kids and their parents that you planned for them to be at church and that you’re thankful they’re in your group.”*
- **Ask:** *Although this part of the book is written to leaders of kids’ groups, what should student and adult group leaders be able to glean from this advice?*
- **Lead** participants to identify ways they can make sure they arrive early every week and are available to meet and greet members and guests. List their ideas on a markerboard or a large wall-size Post-IT Note.
 - Responses might include:
 - Go to bed early on Saturday night and get a full night’s rest.
 - Decide what clothes you will wear on Sunday morning before going to bed on Saturday night.
 - Ensure that any children in the home get a full night’s rest and are ready to get up.
 - Set a departure time alarm so that you leave home in plenty of time.
- **Discuss:** *There is an old adage that says, ‘On time is late, and early is on time.’ How might arriving early create a better experience for members, guests, and group leaders?*

15 Minutes – Till the Soil

- **Direct attention** to page 30 and the heading “Student Ministry Culture – Created or Cultivated?” Direct participants to read the following paragraph on page 31 of *Welcome Aboard!*:
 - “A key shift for youth leaders cultivating a welcoming ministry and pursuing hospitality is trust. Hospitality starts with noticing where you are, becoming more aware of who is around you, and trusting there is work to do right here. An important shift from obligatory door greeting to becoming a welcoming ministry lies in how long you’re willing to pause for someone. This starts with the right posture. You are a steward, and in that humble posture, I want to ask you to get low. Get really low. Like the ground floor. Lean down, ear to the ground, to hear and understand what your students are saying. Till the soil.”
- **Say:** *Although the above quotation is from the chapter directed towards student ministry group leaders, there is much we can all learn from the writer’s thoughts about several key words and phrases related to creating a more welcoming culture.*
- **Write** the following phrases on a markerboard or a wall-size Post IT Note:
 1. Pause for someone.
 2. Right posture...a steward
 3. Get low...ear to the ground.
 4. Till the soil
- **Place** attendees into four groups and assign one of the phrases above to each group (an individual can be a group). Give them 5 minutes to decide why the phrase is important, and how they might put it into practice as group leaders.
- **Invite** a spokesperson from each group to share with everyone else a summary of what their group discussed.

15 Minutes – Unreasonable Hospitality

- **Guide** attendees to locate the third chapter in *Welcome Aboard!* and read the following quotation from page 46 about a famous New York City restaurant that discovered the secret to pleasing its customers by delivering “unreasonable hospitality.”
 - “According to author Will Guidara, unreasonable hospitality happens when you give people more than they expect; unreasonable hospitality creates joy for the one being served. In his *New York Times* bestseller, *Unreasonable Hospitality*, Guidara chronicled the journey he and his business partner embarked on as they opened Eleven Madison Park, a restaurant located in New York City. They differentiated themselves from the hundreds of restaurants around them by providing exceptional, even unreasonable, hospitality. In a poignant statement early in the book,

Guidara said, “People will forget what you do; they will forget what you said. But they never forget how you made them feel.” As their restaurant business grew, Eleven Madison Park gained a reputation for being the place to dine because the entire restaurant staff was committed to making people feel welcomed, cared for, and served in unusually personal and profound ways.” – *Welcome Aboard!* page 46

- **Invite** attendees to brainstorm reasons that guests at your church (and in the attendee’s Bible study groups) might feel:
 - Unwelcomed and unwilling to come back.
 - Overjoyed and ready to return for a second visit.(list their responses on a markerboard or a wall-size Post-It Note)
- **Direct** attendees to continue brainstorming ways that they and their group members can deliver “unreasonable hospitality” to every guest.
- **Read** the Story of Rocky on pages 52-53 of *Welcome Aboard!*.
- **Ask:** *Can anyone identify with Rocky’s frustration in trying to find a Bible study group to belong to?* Invite people to share comparable stories.
- **Read** the following quote from page 57 of *Welcome Aboard!*:
 - Carey Nieuwhof said something very profound in an online article titled “8 Disruptive Trends That Will Rule the Church in 2021.” In this article about the post-pandemic church, he wrote about groups and the importance of connection. I am amazed at how short yet profound his words were. He said, “Growing churches (and yes, that includes small and mid-sized churches too) will realize that connection and community will win out over content in the end, and they will focus their resources there. Nobody should be able to out-local or out-community the local church.” *Ouch.* Groups can’t just be about the transfer of information. They must be places of transformation and connection.”
- **Designate** one corner of your meeting room as “Agree,” and the opposite corner as “Disagree.” Instruct your attendees to move to the corner that represents their thoughts for or against the quote from page 57. Then invite volunteers in each corner to explain why they chose “Agree” or “Disagree.”
- **Remind** the attendees that biblical hospitality is grounded in relationships and actions towards outsiders. Say: *People expect a church to be friendly, so we do not get any bonus points for that. What they expect to find is a place where they can belong, make new friends, and have community and connection.*
- **Ask:** *If you were a guest trying to connect with a group of adults, what actions on the part of the group, beyond an initial greeting, would make you feel valued and welcomed to the group?*

15 minutes – Conclusion

- **Invite** attendees to quickly scan the chapter in *Welcome Aboard!* that corresponds to the group they lead (chapter 1 – Kids, chapter 2 – students, chapter 3 – adults), looking for any additional thought or insight that was not covered during the training session.

- **Call for** volunteers to share what caught their attention and why it is important in providing a high-quality, high-touch experience for the guests who attend their groups.

Close in Prayer

- **Thank** the attendees for making an investment of their time in the training.
- **Pray** that biblical hospitality will be shown afresh and anew during the next year as groups and group leaders seek to provide much-needed biblical hospitality to strangers.

Closing Challenge

- **Encourage** group leaders to share the content from the training session with others, and to read the *Welcome Aboard!* booklet if they have not already.