URANTIA ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL



Study Group Guide

A guide for starting, hosting, and facilitating new and existing Urantia Book study groups face-to-face and online

Produced by Urantia Association International Study Group Committee

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Central Office Administration
Urantia Association International
4000 W Montrose Avenue #606
Chicago, IL 60641

Phone: 1-773-572-1180

Email: centraloffice@urantia-association.org

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INTRODUCTION

Dear friends of *The Urantia Book*,

This guide has been produced with loving care by people who wish to fulfill the mission to create thousands of study groups. Study groups form the foundation on which the revelation can accomplish its worldwide mission "… to expand cosmic consciousness and enhance spiritual perception…" (0:0.2, 1.2).[1] They also serve to foster the emergence of new leaders and teachers.

Study groups are places where spiritual community takes root and where intellectual and spiritual growth are encouraged. While study groups are autonomous, they benefit greatly from interactions with other study groups, and with the organizations that support and nurture them. And because their autonomy is necessary to foster spiritual unity, they avoid political, social, or sectarian influence.

Study groups should always focus on the teachings of *The Urantia Book* and how to integrate them into everyday life, for it is when the truth is alive within us that it becomes an effective tool of dissemination in our family, at work, and in society at large. Study groups are a reflection of their participants, as well as the hosts who lead these participants on the path of spiritual and intellectual discovery.

The goal and purpose of study groups is to transform the world one person at a time. Read this guide carefully and you will benefit from the experience of others – it will help you to start or improve your own study group.

> When man goes in partnership with God, great things may, and do, happen. (132:7.9, 1467.5)

Building a spiritual community… one study group at a time.

With sincerity,

Urantia Association International Study Group Committee

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1 The reference after each quote includes Paper, Section, Paragraph followed by Page and Paragraph. For example, (132:7.9, 1467.5) means:

- Paper 132, Section 7 and the 9th paragraph in that section
- Page 1467, and the 5th paragraph on that page

Depending on your edition/translation/printing/version, the page numbers may differ slightly.

A Special Welcome



Since the publication of The Urantia Book in 1955, volunteer organizations have worked diligently to spread its teachings. One of the most effective ways to do this is by assisting the creation of new study groups around the world. Thankfully, there are already hundreds of groups in existence.

When you first decide to lead a group, you enter this growing worldwide community of study groups that is slowly transforming our planet. You and your new study group join an inspired, worldwide corps of truth seekers who are learning and living the fifth epochal revelation.

Our hearty assistance is available to all students of *The Urantia Book* regardless of any religious, national, political, or reader association. Study groups are not licensed, sanctioned, or controlled by either Urantia Foundation or Urantia Association; they are meant to be free from organizational control. According to *The Urantia Book* Study Group Directory, which is a cooperative internet project of three Urantia Book organizations, "Study groups are autonomous gatherings of Urantia Book readers, unaffiliated with any organization, though the organizations that sponsor this Internet resource foster and support them."[2]

There are no requirements for forming a study group other than the desire of a few people to share their thoughts and studies of the teachings. This guide is provided as a tool to help you start a group or to improve your existing group and, hopefully, it will answer questions you may have along the way. If you choose to create a group, you will join hundreds of others before you who have found great spiritual satisfaction by doing so. In addition, you will discover that devotional study with a group enhances and illuminates the meaning of concepts found in *The Urantia Book*.

Your efforts to start, host, or nurture a study group will ring throughout eternity for all who begin their spiritual journey on Urantia.

May our Father bless you and those who join with you in this important endeavor.

Enrique Traver
President, Urantia Association International

2 https://www.urantiastudygroup.org/

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Australia



Columbia



Philippines

I. GROUP STUDY OF THE URANTIA REVELATION

Hosting Group Study: An Overview

Starting a Urantia Book study group can be easier than you may think. All that is needed is the desire to set a time and place to meet (in-person or online), a list of a few candidates, and the courage to invite them. While group participation is what a study group is all about, success usually comes down to one dedicated person—and that person could be you! This guidebook is written for those who hold such a vision in their heart.

At first, you may feel awkward sending out invitations to people you may or may not know. But long experience has shown that most localities abound with potential or existing readers, and that many are glad to be invited for study. Most will welcome your invitation even if they do not immediately become part of the group.

Each study group will inevitably evolve its own unique personality. The unfolding of group identity is based on the host, those who attend, and on your methods of study and fellowship. And remember: There are a myriad of ways to study together and enjoy the group experience.

In this guide, we explain the steps involved in organizing your first meeting—the most important one. Plus, we present what we consider to be the ideal conditions for hosting a successful group as well as facilitating the flow of study and social interactions. If you are already the host of a study group, you will also benefit from suggestions in this guide.

After the first few meetings, it will become more apparent as to which study and socializing techniques fit the emerging personality of the group, and you may want to adjust accordingly.

As your group grows over the months and years that follow, we encourage you to provide variety by occasionally changing your format or study methods. Again, allow your group to evolve in ways that suit you and your members. We provide a list of study approaches later in this guide.

We always suggest that you—as the host or organizer—make it consistently clear that your purpose is the study of *The Urantia Book*. This does not preclude the discussion of other valuable writings or ideas that may relate to the topic of discussion. However, keep your focus on the unique text of the revelation, a task that is sufficient to mightily challenge any group!

We further recommend that a group ideally not exceed more than ten persons on a regular basis. With more than that, it becomes difficult for everyone to get involved—and participation is the key to realizing the benefits. If over-attendance occurs, find a way for the group to split into two groups. Remember that one of the purposes of group study is to create more study groups and therefore more opportunities for training teachers and leaders.

In the most general sense, while it is crucial to keep your group focused on *The Urantia Book*'s teachings, it is also important to provide a favorable setting for study as well as attending to the social and spiritual needs of the individuals in the group. Among the most important elements of a successful group, these stand out:

- The commitment of one or more founders to the success of the group.

- Consistency in meeting times and places, and a suitable environment for study.
- A critical mass of readers (usually 3 to 10) and willingness to screen new members.
- A method of study and a technique of self-governance that suits the group.
- Skillful, gentle, and effective facilitation.
- The spiritual growth that results from in-depth study, sincere sharing, prayer, and worship.
- The love that naturally arises from association with fellow Urantia Book students.
- A safe and open atmosphere for questions, comments, and personal interpretations of the teachings.

Note: Please bear in mind that we use two different terms: **hosting** and **facilitating**. By hosting, we mean tasks like providing the place to meet or the software for an online group, finding initial members, organizing logistical details, etc. By facilitating, we mean tasks like leading and guiding the study group meeting. The same person or multiple people can do these tasks.

Why Start a Study Group?

You have probably heard that the early leaders of the Urantia movement were instructed to form thousands of study groups worldwide. The revelators made this suggestion, we believe, because they understood that a group study environment has many advantages over isolated, individualized study.

Of course, nearly everyone discovers the revelation as an individual and first begins to study on their own. But after a time, most seek a deeper relationship with the meanings and values of the text that can be found by sharing them with others.

Over nearly seven decades, it has become clear that study group members experience many benefits unique to the group setting:

- Enhanced intellectual knowledge of the text through shared interpretations.
- Exponential expansion of meanings; two persons can discover far more than one alone.
- Social bonding, true fellowshipping, and enduring friendships.
- A broadening of perspective—growth in cosmic perception.
- Personal spiritual growth through sharing, prayer, and worship.

Whether you are a host or an attendee, study group offers numerous benefits. After attending a study group a few times, most people find that they sincerely miss the experience when they cannot attend. Group study is not the only way to study the teachings—but it does seem to be the best way.

Private study of a great revelation is intrinsically rewarding, but this world needs many more study groups and the benefits they confer to humanity. And so, if you truly desire to host a group, begin where you are—but begin today!

The Spiritual Dimension of Group Study

Personality association and mutual affection is efficient insurance against harmful isolation.

> There is positive strength in the knowledge that you live for the welfare of others, and that these others likewise live for your welfare and advancement. Man languishes in isolation. (160:2, 1776.3)

Individuals who have studied alone for many years often report a curious thing: They feel like they are reading an expanded version of the same book when they begin to read with others.

Group consideration of the text illuminates meanings and concepts because the group setting offers the richness of multiple viewpoints.

The result is a balancing and correcting influence on the formation of individual opinions—not to mention the emotional and spiritual reinforcing effect of group participation.

We are told in the revelation that we find God and grow spiritually not only by means of what the Spirit of God teaches us directly, but also through close association with our fellows. Rodan of Alexandria spoke at length about the benefits of group association.

> Many noble human impulses die because there is no one to hear their expression. Truly, it is not good for man to be alone. (160:2, 1775.7)

Rodan added that, through association, we enrich our souls by pooling our respective spiritual possessions, thereby avoiding the ever-present tendency to fall victim to distortion of vision, prejudice of viewpoint, and narrowness of judgment.

Other benefits include the recognition of our membership in a vast cosmic community, and the corollary that a study group is a microcosm of this universal family of God. Attending a study group recharges our spiritual batteries, uplifts our intellects, and inspires us to serve and love others. Ultimately, participating in group study of the revelation brings to each individual a greater understanding of God the Father and his ascension plan for all of us.

Study Groups and Truth Dissemination

Study groups are a vital part of the plan for disseminating the teachings of *The Urantia Book*, including the promotion of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind around the world. They provide opportunities for future teachers and leaders to develop their skills in an open and compassionate atmosphere. They allow us to experiment in a friendly environment with creative and sometimes highly personal interpretations.

Study groups help us to explore our beliefs through our association with fellow truth seekers and kindred spirits who have the same desire to grow spiritually and share their faith. These associations of readers are powerful confidence builders for every kind of truth disseminator—from those who are trying to inject fresh ideas into everyday conversations, to those who aspire to become ambassadors of the kingdom.

> When a great truth seeker and a great truth giver meet, the result is a great and liberating enlightenment born of the experience of new truth. (130:1.1, 1428.1)



II. HOW TO LAUNCH A STUDY GROUP

Making the Decision to Host a Study Group

It takes determination to host a study group; real success requires an ongoing commitment of time and effort. Convening a meeting may consume only a couple of hours of your time but you must make a continuing commitment to "hold the space" for those few hours, and you must do so even when the attendance is low or problems occur. If the group is to survive, your dedication over months and even years is essential.

We know from long observation that some study groups flounder while others thrive. Experience suggests that successful groups are those that have a host (or a few co-hosts) who provides the consistency of regularly scheduled meetings at predetermined locations, and these meetings are hosted with patience, understanding, love, and genuine effort.

If you are considering hosting a study group, we suggest you consult the checklist below. Note that a more extensive checklist is provided in Addendum A.

- Are you willing to make a study group a priority in your life for the coming months and years?
- Do you have the dedication required to nurture a new social entity that will include people you don't know?
- Are you willing to devote a couple of hours each week to convene your group?
- Are you in a position to facilitate the meeting or to delegate that duty to someone else who has the required skills and commitment?
- Are you able to be flexible with the unfolding of the group process, eventually allowing the study group to develop and evolve its own group personality and methodology?
- Consider if you want to have an online group, face-to-face, or a hybrid one.

Maybe you would like to enjoy the experience of having a spiritual meeting in your own home, which may have a beneficial influence on the family/inhabitants of the house. If you have a family and if the group is to meet in your home, will your family members participate in the meetings? If not, are they willing to tolerate the presence of the group without disruption or experiencing feelings of inconvenience or neglect?

Hopefully your family or housemates will be supportive of your efforts. If not, then it is best to host the group outside your home, such as in a library or religious facility, or to team up with another motivated person who can fulfill the role of host. And even if you don't actually host the group or directly manage its logistics, bear in mind that the role of a study group facilitator provides you with a chance to serve. The topic of the study environment is further addressed in Section III.

As founder of your group, members will look to you as their leader. People will often refer to this as "your group." This means, for example, that if the group gets stuck on a decision, you should at first offer alternatives or simply make that decision. Later, after some form of group

governance gets underway, you can relax and let the group as a whole manage its affairs.

Finally, always remember to pray for guidance and be open to receive spiritual assistance. We recommend that the first thing you do after deciding to host a group is to give your decision over to the spiritual influences in and around you. Remember that we are surrounded and indwelt by spirit helpers who will assist us if we are open to their guidance.

> When man goes in partnership with God, great things may, and do, happen. (132:7.9, 1467.5)

Initial Meeting

Finding interested people

Your first task as a new host will be to find potential members, screen them, and then bring everyone on your list together for an initial meeting to organize the study group. Of all possible methods of recruitment, direct personal contact usually proves best for inviting people to join your group.

Here is a summary of tried-and-true methods for recruitment:

- Invite your closest associates. Your family, personal friends, and acquaintances who are interested in the book should be invited. These people will normally be the core of your study group.
- Utilize databases of official organizations such as Urantia Foundation, Urantia Association and other Urantia Book organizations that maintain databases of readers who have given permission for other readers to contact them (see Addendum B).
- Experiment with local advertising. Small display advertisements in local newspapers, website listings, or in local bookstores and spiritual centers can draw additional people.
- You can also register your group in *The Urantia Book* Study Group Directory and specify that you are looking for new participants to start the group. Newsletters or publications such as the *Tidings* of Urantia Association can also be used to advertise your group. Contact Urantia Book associations or organizations to help foster and promote your study group.

Here are more tips for finding potential members of your group:

Truth in advertising

Always make sure prospects are fully aware of the spiritual nature of the meeting before inviting them to visit the group. You don't want to have a new attendee—or the rest of the group—become uncomfortable because a new person has misunderstood the purpose and content of the meeting. Never try to trick anyone into attending your group.

Always inform the group of the arrival of a new member. The first contact and greeting may be key to keeping this new member. In the case of online groups, hold a meeting with the new participant to explain the software involved.

Keep the focus on the revelation

As stated, always make it clear to potential members that your group studies *The Urantia Book* and only *The Urantia Book*, although of course you can use study aids like the Bible, maps, and so forth. Some New Age controversial practices (e.g. divination, channeling, magic) will distract you from studying the book and more likely will create division and damage to your group. Such practices are not supported by Urantia Association International. Of course, people may have whatever kind of study group they wish, but groups that practice such things or require membership in other organizations (political or religious) are not supported or encouraged, nor are they recommended or listed in *The Urantia Book* Study Group Directory.

Safety first

Always keep the safety of the group foremost in mind before adding new people. Be careful not to give out your residential address until you are comfortable with a person. Not everyone may be working for the success of this revelation. Some people may attempt to use your group for their own purposes or seek to influence your group with material other than *The Urantia Book*.

Meeting and screening new prospects.

Screen potential new members that you do not personally know before they are invited to attend a study group session. Request that they first meet you in a public place or at an informal gathering away from the study group. Be cordial, of course, but do not hesitate to ask direct questions about their beliefs and ideas about *The Urantia Book*. Remember that one important role of the host is to protect the integrity of the group. You do not want to assume the best and then discover the worst after a poorly screened stranger starts attending your group. And, while it is true that the teachings of the revelation are meant for all humankind, it is unwise to add someone who is incompatible with the beliefs of your group.

For online groups, have a discussion with the applicant prior to the next meeting. You must consider if you want to publicly post the information for the online meeting or only give that information after having a meeting with the new participant. New members may interfere if they don't know how to use the software or applications. Perhaps having a recording of a previous meeting may help a new member to understand how the online study group operates.

Watch for personal agendas

Many people have fervent personal agendas in regard to religion, spirituality, or politics. Most are indeed fine people with good intentions. Nonetheless, you should understand that a desire to reach an audience may be a hidden motive. In the history of the Urantia movement, there are many stories about how some members have turned out to be disruptive to a study group. A skilled facilitator may assist them in the practice of leaving their issues at the door, allowing them to be a contributing member to the group.

Convening Your Group's First Meeting

Once you have a list of potential members, we suggest you invite everyone on your list to convene for the purpose of creating a study group. Social media could be a good way to keep members in contact and up to date about what's going on in the group. Here are some recommended steps:

Pray for success

Consider asking for heavenly support in this effort. Request that students of the revelation be guided to your new group and that the first meeting is effective.

Create and send your invitation

Find a suitable location and set a time and date to meet. Send out an email or message containing details of the meeting as well as your contact information. Use instant messages apps if you like. Remember that a group of two to ten people is generally considered the ideal size, but all groups start with one person—you. We encourage you to let your Local and/or National Associations, as well as *The Urantia Book* Study Group Directory know about your group in order to receive the support and benefits available.

Confirm with everyone

An email, instant message, or a telephone call reminder a few days before the meeting reinforces the importance of the event. Also, confirm all meeting arrangements a day or two in advance so that last minute problems are less

likely to occur. Another reminder on the day of the meeting may help to remind everyone of the meeting time and other details.

Conduct a purposeful meeting

Arrive early so that you can greet everyone. Start promptly. After introducing yourself, make suggestions about where, when, and how often to meet. Offer your recommendations for the method of study. The meeting will go better if you provide leadership in the form of a basic plan but be sure to allow your plan to be molded to fit the needs of the majority of the group. Allow each person ample time to introduce themselves, and then open the floor for ideas and input on what would appeal to everyone.

Close after specific commitments are made

Although a group decision can be influenced by many contingencies, make sure you come up with some definite arrangement. Before people leave, make certain everyone knows the time, date, and location as well as the topic to be studied at the next meeting. Follow up with a reminder a few days before your inaugural study meeting and keep a record of your decisions.







III. HOSTING AND FACILITATING

Elements of a Successful Study Group

Hopefully, your new study group will turn out to be an enjoyable and edifying experience for everyone. To achieve this happy result, we suggest that hosts seek for a balance between socializing and study, as well as having a balance between intellectual and spiritual types of study appropriate for your participants. It's also helpful to provide the group with comfortable facilities, a reasonable schedule for the meetings, and a variety of learning styles and activities.

Let's look a little more closely at these and other essentials of success:

Be committed and consistent

As we stated earlier, it takes the dependability and consistency of one or more stalwarts to maintain a group's vitality. Without this committed core, it is especially difficult to weather transitions, such as periods when attendance falls off or when difficulties arise.

Above all, cultivate a core group of participants who are committed to meeting at a regular time and place. This is especially important for those who haven't been able to attend for some period of time. Predictable times and locations are essential to success.

Some groups rotate among the homes of members. Although this approach spreads the responsibility of hosting and allows for a growth experience on the part of these additional hosts, it also invites other problems. While rotating meetings may seem to reduce the workload for you as the anchor host, it isn't necessarily true because it can also generate more work and confusion for members.

Meet weekly

Experience shows that, if possible, meetings should be held each week. It is hard to maintain momentum when meetings occur less often. Monthly meeting dates and complicated meeting schedules such as "the first and third Tuesday of each month" can be difficult to schedule or remember. And yet, while such schedules may be more difficult to maintain, they are certainly better than no study group at all. Instant message apps could be a way to keep contact and remind members of the meeting.

Be contactable

Make sure everyone knows how to contact the host (or a co-host) and that this contact person is easily reached. By the same token, ensure that the host or someone in the group knows how to quickly communicate with all members in case of a last-minute cancellation.

Provide for an optimal study environment

A comfortable and suitable meeting place is essential. Here are some useful tips:

- Most meetings are held in a host's home, but home meetings can pose a few problems. For example, the comfort and convenience of the host may be offset by the lack of seating or adequate lighting, lack of parking, or poor street lighting, or even by the preference of some who prefer not to meet in such an intimate setting. That said, it is a truism that holding meetings in

a home may provide greater warmth, comfort, and friendliness.

- Face-to-face study is optimal because it promotes discussion and interaction. Consider having your group meet around a dining table in a home or a boardroom table in a public place, but be sure that seating doesn't become too crowded.
- Meetings in public spaces in libraries, community centers, or church facilities can be good choices, especially for more serious study. Homes confer the benefit of a more informal and friendly feeling, but public facilities may give participants the beneficial feeling of a classroom atmosphere. Nearly everyone can accept meeting in public places, as such facilities are often more centrally located and feature good parking. As host, one big advantage for you in holding your group's study outside your home is that there is less danger of introducing a stranger into your home, as well as less general disruption to your family. If you decide to work in a public place, be sure to ask if there is any cost involved, what rules may apply, and how often you may use the facility. Find out if refreshments are allowed in the room. Also, ask whether there are other meetings nearby that might disturb the worshipful periods of your meeting.

Online Study Groups

Online study groups, also known as virtual study groups, have become more common recently for many reasons. Most of what you will find in this Guide can be applied or adapted to online study groups. Other considerations are exclusive for online groups; here is a list of tips that may help:

- Choose the meeting software you want to use for the group. Ideally it should be free to the attendees, not too complex, and user friendly. The software should be compatible with different types of devices (smartphones, computers, tablets, etc.). Some paid software could be available for free from Urantia Association. Please contact us to find out if this option is available.
- Take some time to learn the software, how to use the microphone, camera, and how to share your screen, as well as other available features. Take some time to explain to the participants how to do these things themselves. They need to be confident with these tools if they are going to actively participate or create new groups in the future.
- Make sure to have an electronic version of *The Urantia Book* available. It is free in many formats and languages from the Urantia Foundation website. The most used format these days is perhaps the pdf version. You can open this type of format using either your browser or a more dedicated software such as Adobe Acrobat Reader. But on smartphones, the common web view is the best.
- Encourage participants to use a headset with microphone to get good quality sound and prevent audio feedback or echo. One of the most common problems with online study groups is that someone has their microphone and speaker too close together causing echo. People often don't realize they are unmuted and that their background noise (kids playing, dogs barking, family members talking) disturbs the audio quality of the meeting. Gently remind them to mute when not speaking. If necessary, the host can mute participants. As host, be sure you are well versed in using the software you have chosen.
- It is crucial that the host/facilitator have a stable Internet connection.

Online groups have some advantages that you can make use of, for instance you can:

- Share articles and other study aids with all participants through your screen.

- Conduct small workshops from time to time by dividing the meeting into sub-sessions or working groups if your software allows it. Leave some time at the end so that everybody can have a chance to share what they have learned.
- Invite experienced readers to give a presentation on a specific subject or to share experiences with the group.
- Watch movies/videos of presentations that can help with the part of the book you are studying or any part that you find inspiring.
- Invite participants from other places around the globe.

Social Elements of Group Success

Groups are most successful when the members enjoy each other's company. If no time is allowed for socializing, some may feel the group is too rigid and boring. Yet, if too much time is spent socializing, some will feel their time is wasted. To provide for appropriate social time, many groups meet for a meal before a meeting or hold a potluck dinner once a month.

Your group may want to consider some form of prayer at the beginning or the end of the meeting. A moment of silence often allows people to shed the stress of the day and be more receptive to spiritual inspiration. Find out what your group enjoys and finds comfortable.

Socialization is good for the soul, and frequent interaction improves group camaraderie. Group life and community building can be a key feature of the emotional, educational, and spiritual growth of students over time. But remember to keep social time and study time largely separate.

There is often value in asking people to share their personal experiences about the topic being studied—how did they use or benefit from the teachings? Real life experiences show the teachings in action and give meaning and value to them.

Balance social time and study

Strive for balance. If the host doesn't provide for a little social interaction during the meeting, people may get bored. But if the facilitator doesn't steer the meeting away from unwanted tangents and excessive chatter, members may see little value in attending. The study group host needs to develop a feel for what the group wants during any particular meeting, perhaps by keeping an eye on everyone's body language and actions.

Avoid "group therapy"

While groups can be a place for people to reveal their innermost selves and find emotional support, a study group should not turn into a therapy session for any member. This will discourage individuals who want to focus on the contents of the book. Personal sharing is helpful when connected to the topic of study, but overmuch emphasis on revealing intimate thoughts and emotions for its own sake is unwise. If someone is having a difficult life situation, the study group family can be a great source of comfort and support. However, if the situation is overwhelming the group, offer to speak privately with the person after the meeting.

Hold celebrations

Having celebrations together for holidays, potluck dinners, and other social functions are vital to developing trust in one another and creating genuine community. Many groups hold sacramental meals on Christian holidays. A remembrance supper, as established by Jesus, can be a very beautiful occasion.

Introduce variety

Vary your study method occasionally to enhance learning. Remember that there are several forms of learning: Some people learn by reading aloud, some by listening, some through discussion,

others by seeing or doing. A list of study methods follows this section.

Choose facilitators and rotate them

Everyone who is willing should be allowed to facilitate. Those who are unwilling can be gently encouraged, as they may have leadership potential and just need some practice with a friendly group. Rotating your facilitators is another way to provide more variety and has the added benefit of giving more people a chance to lead, an experience that may give them confidence to start their own group someday.

Provide refreshments

Of course, refreshments are always welcome in any group. Small refreshments may simply be placed on a table or they can be served before or after the meeting or during a break. Refreshments served during the meeting sometimes can be distracting. Always make sure that drinking water is available for those dry throats from reading aloud.

Avoid controversy

As individuals, members will belong to political, economic, civic, or religious groups of their own choosing. While it is good and wise for individuals to participate in outside groups, restrain any discussion of topics that could be divisive. Maintain the group's focus and conserve its energies for the important mental and spiritual challenges of studying *The Urantia Book*.

Keep the meeting to a reasonable length

Most groups have found that a good meeting length is around two hours. If you meet on a weekday evening, pick a starting time which is late enough to enable after-work attendance but early enough to insure a reasonable ending time. The host or sponsor should not feel embarrassed to indicate when everyone should leave so that no one will inadvertently overstay his or her welcome.

Fostering Group Governance

Always keep regular participants involved with your study group's process and ruling decisions. Try to be flexible and within the scope of *The Urantia Book*. As facilitator, you are there to encourage spiritual growth, not manage results.

Make group decisions

Once you have a cohesive group, let everyone as a whole decide how to study, what to study, as well as where and when to study. Toward that end, take a moment every few meetings to ask for opinions and ideas to see if the group is happy or if they wish to do things differently. In making decisions, the majority should rule, although some groups strive for consensus. Never allow one person to impose their will on the group—especially you.

Allow for a group purpose

A study group can decide, as a group, to have one or more purposes. For example, a group can be committed to fostering a number of things: spiritual growth of the members, intellectual study of the teachings, leadership and teaching skills, spreading the teachings to the larger community by growing membership and spinning off new study groups, as well as service projects, goals, or any combination of these.

Pray together—if the group agrees

Group prayer is a topic that will come up early in the development of a group. Some groups open with a prayer or end with a prayer, either silent or spoken, while others do not have a group prayer. Whatever the case, prayer should always be a group decision. Group prayer is a good tool for creating a more fraternal group. Prayer (or a moment of silence) could help prepare the mind and shift the thoughts from material to spiritual. See the section entitled "Prayer, Worship and Song."

Keep to a reasonable pace of reading

There's no right or wrong pace of reading. Read as much or little as you can; the important thing is to focus on the teachings and to understand what is being read. Don't allow the goal of finishing any particular paper take precedence over the quality of study and successful interaction. If you don't finish a paper, you can always do so during the next meeting. Keeping a wise pace of reading is something you will learn in time. And reading the material in advance will help you to better understand it.

Keep it interactive

Encourage all members to participate in discussions and group activities. The best way to do this, is to establish a non-confrontational atmosphere where people are not afraid to speak up, test ideas, or ask for help in understanding. This issue is addressed in more detail in an upcoming section.



Effective Facilitation of Study Groups

The facilitator of a group has different tasks than a host and need not be the same person. Facilitators have the joy and privilege of leading the group on a twin path of truth-seeking and self-discovery. As group facilitator, it is not your place to teach or lecture, but it is your responsibility to guide the group and whet their appetite for higher truth—to discover a deeper understanding of the revelation—even as you join with the host in supporting the group in healthy social interactions. Getting people to interact can be difficult at first but, in the end, many find these interactions most rewarding. Asking people for their thoughts and opinions can open the door to some interesting discussions.

> The true teacher maintains his intellectual integrity by ever remaining a learner. (130:3, 1433.2)

Suggestions for Study Group Facilitators

Quick Summary

- Direct your attention to the group process as well as to the content of the discussions.
- Blend discussions with question-and-answer sessions.
- Redirect back to the text when a discussion becomes a debate.
- Emphasize a specific point at the beginning of the meeting. Give the group something to dig for in their study; it may stimulate their interest and focus their attention.
- Encourage the discovery of truth and how that truth can be put into action in a person's daily life.
- Keep the meeting moving so that the group can end on time and yet cover a satisfying amount of subject material.
- Notice that Jesus used the Socratic method, which consists of asking questions, leading people to think and discover truth for themselves instead of giving a direct answer.
- Don't think you know it all, stay humble and forever keep learning as a student. As a group facilitator, stay open to the thoughts and opinions of others. Be willing to accept feedback and adjust your style accordingly.

Prepare ahead of time

Read and review the material ahead of time. Consider questions for the group that are relative to the reading and encourage reflective thinking and discussion. Be prepared to offer personal insights or brief comments that may stimulate the sharing of others' experiences.

Stay on topic

Do your best to keep the group on topic without being too rigid. When the discussion takes off in an unrelated direction, the focus of the group goes with it. Worse, divergent discussions can easily become the cause of disagreements or even division; they tend to become speculative and lack specific reference to the text of the revelation. The facilitator must constantly make value judgments about when to curtail off-topic discussions. Nonetheless, side discussions are natural and if it's an interesting tangent, consider setting an unseen timer and let it flow for a couple of minutes before tactfully returning to the reading. Always keep in mind that a group benefits from, and actually appreciates, a friendly but firm facilitator.

Lead with questions

Learn the art of asking carefully phrased and stimulating questions. Specific questions from a facilitator will produce specific answers rather than vague generalities. Prepare a list of one or two questions for each section ahead of time. Once again, notice that Jesus used to ask questions instead of giving the direct answer on many occasions. Remember that the best facilitator is often the one who says the least.

Stay in the background

Refrain from expressing your own opinion or interpretation, as this may impede new readers in their effort to formulate their own interpretation. In a situation that seems appropriate to express a certain opinion or interpretation, or if someone in the group asks, always preface your comments with a disclaimer such as: "My personal experience, understanding, or interpretation is..."

Wrap up a discussion when needed

Wrap up a particular discussion that is lessening in significance by briefly summarizing its import or by acknowledging the contributions made by others. It is good to remind your group that the answers to questions are usually found in the next paragraph. Remember, it's often appropriate to cheerfully say "Let's continue with *The Urantia Book*."

Support appropriate personal sharing

Encourage members to briefly share relevant experiences related to the topic being discussed. Don't allow anyone to dominate the meeting with a narration of their life story and/or turn the meeting into a therapy session. You might ask the others if they have had similar experiences or simply say, "Let's continue reading."

Keep it moving

If someone gets longwinded, you can count on the fact that others in the group will be inwardly hoping that the facilitator will intervene to get the meeting moving again; a gentle firmness is a desirable quality in a facilitator.

It is fine to move through very difficult paragraphs if you don't understand them completely. Often the following paragraphs give answers to the difficult questions. Never doubt that your spiritual helpers, Thought Adjuster, and the Spirit of Truth are guiding you.

Encourage participation

Watch all the members' actions. If you are observant, you will quickly learn when someone wishes to say something but is too shy to step into the conversation. As facilitator, break into the discussion and ask if anyone has any comments, or directly offer that person a chance to speak.

Consider the use of study aids and educational tools

Having a computer open to a search program for *The Urantia Book* is most beneficial. Copies of the Concordance, Concordex, and Paramony are also useful, as are many other secondary study works and religious texts. Tools such as whiteboards, projectors, or flip charts can be used to list important points of discussion. These are not necessary but use them if they are available.

Be time sensitive

Always start on time and end on time. The facilitator is responsible for keeping an eye on the clock so that things don't run over—no matter how well the discussion is going. Study groups in homes could become burdensome for hosts if meetings run too long or members stay too long after the meeting. A study group is also a social function so allow half an hour for the group to break up. This usually ensures that nobody is rushed out the door and that anyone with unfinished thoughts or questions has a chance to address them after the formal meeting. It's also a good time to develop warm friendships.

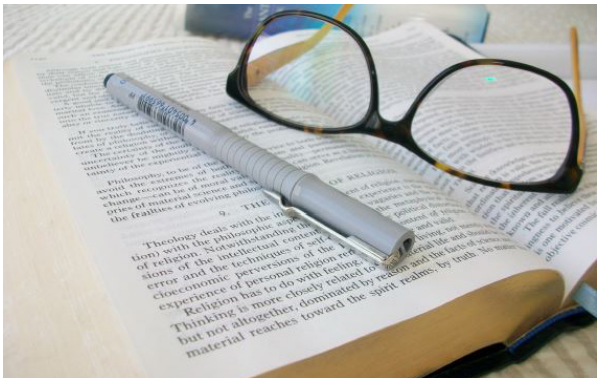
Nurture genuine study

For the learning process of a group to be effective, everyone needs to be physically and mentally comfortable. The group needs to sense that the facilitator is in charge and is protecting them from distractions. And don't try to study more than the group can absorb—often it is better to end a meeting early if members get overloaded with a difficult subject. Keep your study period organized, focused, relevant, participatory, enjoyable, and practical. This helps people to gain a deeper understanding of the teachings and to see the value of studying with others.

Just be a facilitator

Remember that a facilitator is not expected to be an expert on the entire book, you are also a student seeking truth and understanding. Additionally, a good facilitator is not a preacher. Some Urantia Book students are in the process of rejecting a previous religious experience in which they were preached to, so try to avoid this. Finally, a good facilitator keeps the group focused and aims for everyone's participation.

Methods of Group Study



The suggestions that follow are offered as a possible starting point but don't let them limit your creativity. Your group can and will evolve methods of study and fellowship that suit your members. Indeed, there are as many ways to conduct the study session as there are groups. Here are a few additional pointers to keep in mind as you peruse the list of study methods below:

- The host may need to make the initial decisions, but once a group gets established, everyone should ratify the method of study. Support that decision by making members aware of the many methods presented in this section of the guidebook.
- Favor study methods that provide for some degree of participation by each member. Participation engages the student, inspires regular attendance, and better prepares members to someday lead their own study group.
- Just as each of us has different needs, study groups should differentiate themselves to meet the needs of a group.

- It may be desirable to have multiple groups in your area that function differently to meet those needs.
- In general, study groups that remain focused on a study of the teachings of *The Urantia Book* are more attractive to new readers from all walks of life.

Sequential study

Sequential study is the most common method of study. The group reads through *The Urantia Book* together, from beginning to end sequentially. You might try covering one paper per meeting, with members taking turns reading a page or section, but you can also just read one section or even one paragraph. Encouraging people to read the paper in advance may help them to better understand what they read. Some groups have one person do all the reading or even play an audio version of the book and stop and start as you discuss. Be sure to allow frequent intervals for questions or discussion. New groups may find it easier to select less difficult papers or groups of papers and simply read through them. A popular option is to reserve some time for turning to Part IV and ending the reading with a spiritually uplifting selection. Another common option is to jump occasionally to a part related to the sequential reading and then keep reading where you left off.

Topical study

In topical studies, groups usually choose a topic to be discussed in the next meeting. Members generally study that topic ahead of time and then take turns reading parts, references, or quotes from *The Urantia Book* that are related to the topic. Some groups favor combining "sequential study," with an occasional "topical study" to provide variety.

Studying with inclusive response

This method gets everyone involved in the discussion. Even timid persons are assured of getting their chance to speak. With this method, each person is given a turn to speak about the material just read until everyone has spoken at least once. This is a good way to conduct a study group when people may not know each other well.

Group discussion

In this approach, a facilitator presents a question to the members of the group based on the reading and members consider specific answers to those questions. Discourage the use of phrases such as "You are wrong." Or "I disagree with that." Rather encourage them to say, "my understanding is…" or "I wonder if…." Self-assertion creates friction within the group.

> But in our evolving universe of relative perfection and imperfection we rejoice that disagreement and misunderstanding are possible, for thereby is evidenced the fact and the act of personality in the universe. (75:8.7, 846.6)

> The religion of the spirit does not demand uniformity of intellectual views, only unity of spirit feeling. (155:6.9, 1732.2)

Lecture with reading and discussion

The lecture format usually designates one or more persons to present their ideas about a topic in conjunction with specific readings. The lecturer then facilitates a discussion or a question-and-answer session. This more formal style of meeting can be used to help members develop their techniques for presenting topics at Urantia conferences or outside organizations.

Quotation study

In this method, a person reads a sequence of paragraphs and facilitates group discussion of each quote, or perhaps of a set of quotes related to a topic.

Question & answer

This method invites anyone in the group to bring a question to be discussed. The group works through questions one at a time in an *ad hoc* fashion. This works best if you have on hand an index or concordance of *The Urantia Book*, or a computer with the ability to search the text.

"Lectio divina"

This Latin term refers to silent, contemplative group reading, or to prayerful reading aloud that permits time for meditation, allowing each member to engage in a personal encounter with a spiritual text. Such a reading of an assigned portion or topic can, at your option, be followed by facilitated discussion. Use this method to invoke the Spirit of Truth who will thereby assist each participant in seeking deeper meanings and values in their personal interpretations.

The informal study group

This approach, more suitable for advanced groups, allows free discussion of topics and how *The Urantia Book* relates to them. A topic may be designated ahead of time or could be allowed to emerge after the group assembles. Informal groups tend to require strong facilitation so they stay focused on *The Urantia Book* and avoid unrelated topics.

Dramatic reenactment

Reenactment of dramatic events in the book can make the teachings come to life. For example, you might relive the last supper by having each person enact a character (and have one person act as the narrator) as you follow the depiction of this event in *The Urantia Book*.

Audio-visual

Video, PowerPoint, or other forms of A/V presentation are always enjoyable. The presentation is then followed by a group discussion. By sharing your screen in an online group or using a television as a display, you can share the many wonderful Urantia related videos on YouTube and similar websites. There are some truly outstanding video productions available.

Fun and games

Various forms of materials may be added to any of the above methods. These are study aids intended to be used occasionally instead of a technique to use in a permanent fashion for a study group. They can include trivia quizzes, board games, matching games, multiple choice questions, fill-in-the-blank statements, or crossword puzzles. Several word games are available online that can be adapted to Urantia trivia or language. Having an occasional "game night" will create fun and friendship and prevent the group from becoming overly serious. Don't hesitate to change methods occasionally to keep the group fresh and vibrant.

Using Study Aids



It is always helpful to have study aids close at hand. Today the best study aids are the Internet and electronic devices. The following aids in physical or electronic form may be helpful but they are not essential for starting a study group.

There are many classical reference books, although some are difficult to obtain in physical form nowadays. They include:

- *Key Word Index* by Urantia Foundation.
- *Concordex of The Urantia Book* (A cross between an Index and a Concordance).

- *Concordance* (an alphabetical index of the principal words in *The Urantia Book*).
- *Paramony* (cross-referencing *The Urantia Book* with the Bible).
- *The Pronunciation Guide*.

Today the internet is the best resource, however, if you don't have a computer or internet connection, then the best aids may be:

- A dictionary (if possible, from the time when the papers were delivered).
- An atlas, especially with maps for the life of Jesus.
- The Bible and other religious texts for reference.

There are lots of different resources available online. If you have a smart device and/or a computer with internet connection, links and aids like the following are available:

- A searchable electronic version of *The Urantia Book* or a website search engine.
- Audio versions of the book from websites or CDs.
- Some Urantia organizations have good study aid resources, please check them.
- A dictionary from the time when the papers where delivered (1935).
- A recent edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Some apps may help you to study the book. For instance, there is one Urantia app that has a random quote generator that may be a fun way to explore the teachings, randomly select a quote and then discuss it.

Numerous aids are offered for free or minimal cost from Urantia Foundation and Urantia Association. The Association can also assist you in finding those aids most suitable for your group. Study aids and secondary works may assist in the understanding of concepts from *The Urantia Book*, but the revelation should remain the primary source of teaching.

Anatomy of a Sequential Reading Group

As a suggestion, here is an example of the possible stages in a sequential reading that may help.

After a few minutes of greeting and social time, the host calls the meeting to order and reminds attendees to silence their mobile devices before leading the group in a short prayer of thanksgiving or silent worship to prepare hearts and minds for in-depth study. Transitioning into the meeting, he or she introduces the facilitator who begins with a very short overview of the evening's designated paper. The facilitator reads the introductory portion of the paper. Beginning with the person on his right, the facilitator asks for a reading of the first section, explaining that each person reading should stop after each section, and directing that questions or comments should be held until the end of each section.

After each reading, the facilitator opens the floor, requesting a hand raise to speak. At times, he or she may gently encourage new readers to ask questions. When no one has further questions or comments on a section just read, the facilitator then asks the next person to read the subsequent section, and so on. When the time to end the meeting is near, the facilitator concludes the discussions and briefly summarizes the meeting. The host then invites everyone to close with a minute or two of silence. After closing this prayer, the host makes certain that everyone knows the time and place of the next meeting and what will be studied. More social time follows.

A Personal Philosophy of Facilitation

Facilitating a study group is the sacred work of directing the encounter of your brothers and sisters with the fifth epochal revelation. As such, facilitators should inspire each person to wholeheartedly engage in this encounter. You should always do this in the spirit of an educator.

Facilitators recognize that we are all at different points in our journey and this can lead us to varied interpretations—and further, that this phenomenon is both beautiful and good. Let the group discussion bloom and become fragrant.

Facilitators encourage an environment in which everyone is respectful of those with whom they may disagree. Most people do not like to be told they are wrong, but they can learn from other viewpoints when they are expressed in a loving and non-confrontational manner.

There are no official interpretations of *The Urantia Book*. The text speaks for itself, and our understanding of the teachings can be broadened by many unique viewpoints.

All participants should be allowed to offer differing opinions, but again, they should never be permitted to assert that another student is wrong. The Spirit of Truth, not fellow study group members, is in charge of inwardly determining in each participant what is true. Study is more productive if each person does not feel the need to defend a particular viewpoint but simply offers it to the group for consideration.

A good way to involve new readers, or shy or quiet members, is for the facilitator to show an obvious desire to hear what they have to say. Encourage them to speak by asking a simple question or by gently inviting them to give their opinion. Positive praise and reinforcement serve to encourage group participation by all.

Discussions should include consideration of not only the intellectual facts but also personal or life experiences from reading the book, as well as ways to apply the teachings and spiritual values in our lives. They also serve as a way to share personal interpretations of the text's meanings and values, and to inspire each member to live the truths recognized in each reading.

Aspects of Study Group Membership

New members may provide a breath of fresh air and a surge of enthusiasm that can invigorate a mature group, intellectually and socially. Longtime members are sometimes uncomfortable with new members simply because their new ideas are not in accord with the old ones. Making a visitor or new member feel welcomed and valued may invade the comfort zone of the group, but this will cause growth for everyone. An important element of any study group meeting is the love that is shared among those in attendance and extended to visitors and new members. Membership growth comes from loving relationships with those around us. Never hesitate to invite someone that seems interested. The act is yours; the consequences God's. Not everyone who is invited will come but, unless an invitation is extended, nobody will come.

Some groups are open to new members and some are not—either approach is the prerogative of you as the host, and of your group's members. For example, some groups are actually family units that prefer to study together as a family; other groups may be involved in more advanced study and prefer maintaining a certain common level of understanding; still others have established a goal, such as reading all of Part IV together, and will become open to new members only after completing such a common experience of study.

Sometimes a regular member of the group may ask if they can bring a friend or family member who is curious about the book. People who wish to observe a meeting should always be welcome.

Attracting new members

In addition to the suggestions in Section 2.2 "Finding interested people," as an experienced study group, you can now add to your quest the following items to share with potential new members:

- Personal experiences of group members
- How long the group has been meeting
- Background of existing members
- Goals of the group

Accepting new members into the group

If your study group is open to accepting new members, the basic requirements for membership are simply an interest in *The Urantia Book* and a sincere desire to know and serve God. Still, as a group, you may wish to set some standards for introducing new members. It is necessary to screen the prospective new member who is not known to anyone in the group.

One of the tasks of the facilitator is to make sure the new member is genuinely interested in studying the book. Ask the potential new member questions. For example: Where do you live? How did you find the book? How did you find our group? How long have you been reading the book? What's your interest in joining our group? What passage or part of the book really impressed you? Do you know other readers? If so, who are they? These questions can help you decide if the person is a good addition to your study group. Sometimes you may need to decline to accept a new member, maybe for lack of real interest, safety reasons, or because they may have their own agendas. If the new member does not seem to fit in for some reason, politely and courteously say so. In this situation, the group may offer to help them start their own study group.

Inviting the new member

When inviting the new member to the first meeting, let them know about your rules, how many in the group are likely to be present, and what is expected from them. The host should do this. Also let them know about your group's rules around third party works and non-Urantia Book discussions or topics. Let them know if they are expected to bring food and drink for face-to-face meetings, and let them know what to read ahead of time or which page of the book you are currently reading.

Welcoming the new member

During the first meeting, you can give new members the chance to introduce themselves to the other members and to explain how they found the book. For example: How did they find the book? How long have they been reading the book? Have they read the book all the way through? How did they find out about the study group?

Always be kind, loving and understanding with a new member, especially on the first few meetings, try to exhibit the fruits of the spirit towards them. Be patient with questions, especially from someone new to the book.

It is always exciting to have a new member but don't overwhelm them. The group or individuals may need to constraint themselves and try not to make the new person the single center of attention.

The new member should be encouraged to participate and ask relevant questions. However, in order to avoid excessive disruption with too many questions, consider finding another time before or after the meeting to answer them.

The consciousness of spirit domination is attended by an increasing exhibition of the characteristics of the spirit in the life reactions of such a spirit-led individual, "...for the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance" (34:6.13, 381.7).

The proof of fraternity with the divine Adjuster consists wholly in the nature and extent of the fruits of the spirit demonstrated in the life

experience of the individual believer. "By their fruits you shall know them" (5:2.4, 64.7).

Maintaining attendance

Attendance will be an issue for many study groups but it isn't always an indicator of success or failure. A good size group is desirable for the content and diversity of the group. There will be challenges but there will also be many rewards. The more important thing is to try to maintain a core of regular participants in the group. Attendance tends to fluctuate with the seasons and other outside variables. The obvious key to maintaining attendance is to have a study group that members want to attend. Therefore, keeping the meetings interesting and providing a variety of learning methods is vital to keeping members coming to study group.

Making people feel important to the group gives them a purpose for returning because, without them, something will be missing from the group. Inviting them to actively participate in the functioning of the group usually does this, which is one reason why it may help to rotate the role of facilitator and make sure that everyone contributes to the discussions.

Group chemistry is a difficult thing to predict but, if the host establishes a loving, casual, and inviting tone for meetings where members feel comfortable, the chemistry will create itself. No matter what else is going on in your life, put all that aside during the study period. As host, always be warm, friendly, and cheerful. Show genuine interest in every response or comment by your group members.

Other activities that could maintain interest may include these ideas:

- Invite outside speakers.
- Host joint meetings with other study groups.
- Celebrate Jesus' birthday or other religious holidays of importance in your culture.
- Engage in local community service projects (see more on this below).
- Call regular members who miss a meeting and let them know they were missed.
- Your group may want to consider participating together in some sort of project related to *The Urantia Book* such as library placement, Urantia Association Prison Inmate Response Team (PIRT), or by volunteering for a project through the Urantia Association website. There is always a need for more workers in community service. Love in action!
- Consider adopting or supporting another study group, either locally or from another culture or country. Share study time with them or collaborate on a project together.

The commitment of part-time attendees can be improved by giving them a tangible sense of purpose to go along with the spiritual purpose of a study group. This is often done by engaging in projects in which they can see and feel the direct results of their efforts that benefit others in the community.

Finally, every person is a vital part of the group and needs to be recognized and acknowledged as such from time to time. Be genuinely interested in the needs of group members. People always enjoy being around and sharing their lives with those who love them.

> And when men see you so love them, and when they behold how fervently you serve them, they will perceive that you have become faith-fellows of the kingdom of heaven, and they will follow after the Spirit of Truth which they see in your lives, to the finding of eternal salvation. (191:6, 2044.3)

When a member leaves the group

You want your study group to grow and flourish, therefore if someone leaves, find out why they left. Is the issue with the individual or the group?

What improvements can be made or how can you help that person?

Always show interest for anyone that has left the group, let them know they are welcome to come back if they want. Our goal is to help people benefit from the teachings of *The Urantia Book*.

Some suggestions: Seek another group, start a new group, offer support with questions if the person wants to read alone, or inform them of additional options to study the book (e.g. Urantia Book International School, online forums, and webinars).

Prayer, Worship, and Song



The Urantia Book informs us that:

> Jesus taught the twelve always to pray in secret; to go off by themselves amidst the quiet surroundings of nature or to go in their rooms and shut the doors when they engaged in prayer. (144:3, 1620.3)

However, in discussing the social repercussions of prayer, the Chief of Midwayers writes:

> Prayer need not always be individual. Group or congregational praying is very effective in that it is highly socializing in its repercussions. When a group engages in community prayer for moral enhancement and spiritual uplift, such devotions are reactive upon the individuals composing the group; they are all made better because of participation. (91:5, 998.5)

These two perspectives of prayer leave it open for your group members to find their own way of functioning. It is acceptable to pray or not to pray based on the group's decision. Group prayer, in whatever form that is comfortable for the group, can greatly contribute to a sense of spiritual unity. But group prayer is not for everyone. It is not wise to impose it on group members who are not comfortable with it. A midpoint adopted by many groups is to have a moment of silence or meditation (*) at the beginning of the session. In this way, each person can decide to participate or not without feeling any pressure.

Some groups pray in turns. The facilitator will either conduct the prayer or pray first and then indicate that anyone else who wishes to say something may do so. After a period of silence, the facilitator may conclude the moment with a short prayer, either spontaneously or by reading aloud a prayer, such as the Believer's Prayer (144:3).

If you are fortunate enough to have someone in your group that is musically inclined, the inclusion of spiritually uplifting songs in the meeting can be very enjoyable. Nearly everyone enjoys music, especially when performed by one of the group members. But not everyone is comfortable singing aloud around other people, so be careful when considering sing-along sessions for the group. There is no doubt that music will add another dimension to any study group.

While your religion is a matter of personal experience, it is important to be exposed to the knowledge of a number of other religious experiences (the diverse interpretations of other individuals) in order to prevent your religious life from becoming egocentric— circumscribed, selfish, and unsocial (103:1).

(*) https://urantia-association.org/documents/journal/2013/UAI-Journal_2013_vol-1_en.pdf

(*) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iwR-28B8CJI

INTERLUDE: A Study Group Experience

The Story of Jesus Lighthouse Study Group of Fort Worth, Texas

by Rick Warren

Twelve people came to my first study group meeting! I live in a big metro area where there are scores of readers, so attendance wasn't a problem. But at first it was a little awkward because I knew only half of those who came. Some were there solely because their spouses are readers.

I was fortunate to have a good reader friend at my side. Suzanne was the first sincere reader I met after having found the book six years earlier. She had read *The Urantia Book* about as long as I had and also wanted to meet with others over this awesome revelation. So before long, Suzanne and I began talking about forming a study group.

Getting started

I had the basics: a quiet comfortable place (my living/dining room) and a regular time slot available. I had given it much thought and finally decided to have our meeting one workday evening every two weeks, which fit in very well with everyone concerned. A weekly meeting seemed too much strain on my household, so I choose the bi-weekly schedule. That's one of the beauties of hosting study groups: They can be designed any way the host wishes; the frequency and method of study are left entirely to the host.

We experimented with switching nights a couple of times to adjust to the human schedules and such. But we finally settled on Thursday night, from 7:30 to 9:30.

From the outset, the only iron-clad rule I embraced was to maintain the focus on the text itself, not on individuals, not on peripheral matters, and especially not on politics.

Initial lessons

The awkwardness was gone by the second meeting, and so was about half the group. Only seven showed at this next meeting. Happily, I quickly came to realize that more than seven or eight people at a meeting creates a social dynamic that can inhibit the less assertive members. Plus, it becomes more of a production than an intimate study session.

Over the seven-year period of my study group, the number of attendees varied from three to twenty-two. Again, the size of a study group very much affects the ebb and flow of each participant's open engagement. The host naturally wants to make all feel involved, and if not involved, at least valued and respected. Still, large study groups are not to be avoided per se. They just require a different attitude, greater attention, and more planning. And sometimes the best solution may be to split into two or three smaller groups.

The group life unfolds

We followed the long-established pattern of taking turns reading, as gathered in a circle around a table. And everyone took a turn even though there was no rule requiring participation.

We experimented with asking members to read a whole section, whether it was a few paragraphs

or two pages. But that sometimes exhausted the poor reader, so we switched to a paragraph or two, mostly at the reader's discretion.

Readings were always interspersed or interrupted with discussions arising out of the text. Interruptions were tolerated, if not encouraged. Discussing the text as it is being read is the real heart of the meeting. Herein lies the true value and fruit of study groups. Encourage this in your study group and it will succeed and prosper, if goodness is also present.

I always insisted on keeping the focus on the text. Occasionally and inevitably the group's focus drifted off the text. I found that the level of harmony always dropped in direct proportion to the extent of the drift. For example, I distinctly recall this happening just before the 2000 election in the U.S. when a spontaneous political argument broke out. It felt awful. But harmony again prevailed when attention was returned to study.

Learning to deal with disruption

In our years together there was only one really troublesome issue—one that at first created much consternation and diversion from study. It was a problem that took considerable time to discover the remedy for: How was I to deal with members who habitually talked about themselves and issues unrelated to the group's focus? I was discovering that resentment can easily grow when the same person or persons dominates the meeting with off-topic issues. If such talk continues, some members will simply drop out. And, you may never know why. Too many distracting side conversations can have other deleterious effects as well. If the study group is seen as a social gathering or chattiest more than a venue for the study of this unique, vivifying revelation, then interest will flag.

Eventually a method arose for handling study group members who constantly took the focus off the text. I asked Suzanne—who has an infectious laugh and is a naturally loved-by-all kind of person—to act as "sergeant-at-arms." I never announced her as such, but we agreed beforehand to work together in this way to keep the meeting from being hijacked by well-intentioned but intrinsically talkative members. And we pledged to try to do it without hurting anyone's feelings. Looking back on it, I recognize we were able to accomplish this only because the group's greatest desire was to study this amazing revelation we hold in common. They came to study with others who also had come to study.

The group took to Suzanne's good-natured ribbing and it instantly became a joke. So much so that before long, all Suzanne had to say when the meeting began to drift off text was, "Shut up and read." Big laughs would attend her commands and no one felt shamed; in fact, they often apologized for leading us astray. We were left with a more jovial atmosphere of sincere study and learning.

Realizing the benefits of group study—and socializing

Meeting once every two weeks as we did, it took years to read the book from cover to cover and discuss all that came up during our readings. In the process, we found that there is simply no substitute for group study if you want to fully appreciate and integrate the teaching of this, the most profound book ever written. In my opinion, the revelation can't be fully absorbed without at least once reading it through with a group that recognizes the Urantia papers for what they are: a revelation to a benighted world from those who care for and attend to us on high.

We usually read about a paper per meeting, around ten pages. But sometimes we read just five pages; other times it was fifteen or more. It all depended on the ratio of discussion-to-reading that took place. It should be noted that some people would gladly come half an hour early to socialize and converse. Some would happily stay half an hour after, all depending on what the host permits. I welcomed this overlap of the meetings as time to strengthen friendships, and it had the added advantage of allowing members time

to talk about unrelated matters so the study sessions might keep closer to the real focus of the meeting—studying the text.

Finally came our last meeting. I decided to put an end to my role as a host. We gathered in a circle, talked over our past, celebrated our achievement, and toasted to each other. Then, after conferring with other members, our group broke into two new groups, one for each side of the city. Suzanne became host to one of them. To this day they are both still active. Both are places for new and old readers to intermingle and live out the ancient axiom: "You have learned a thing when you have taught it to another."

Lessons learned

Successful study groups are not difficult if one knows how to deal with the few pitfalls. Indeed, they can be very gratifying. On the other hand, not all study group experiences are good ones. A few years ago, another friend who decided to host found a very contentious and somewhat alarming person at her first meeting. Her study group died then and there. She hasn't opened her home again. That's why it pays to screen people. Of course, screening requires good people skills and, therefore, such a task should be delegated to a sagacious reader.

Overall, my study group experience was most rewarding, and essential to growing in the teachings. But caution is a must, ever observing the Master's admonition: be you gentle and wise.

About all I furnished was a regular, quiet place with a determined focus on the book. Except for ice water, cookies, and coffee, that's all it takes. Members often brought what they liked to snack and sip on. Having a big dictionary on hand helped too.

It was a relaxed and informal meeting that always gave us the same feeling one gets from attending a Urantia conference. Maybe there exists an Angel of the Study Groups that imparts the glow that seems always to characterize such gatherings under Jesus' light.



IV. ADDITIONAL ISSUES FOR STUDY GROUPS

Dealing with Disruptors and Those with Personal Agendas

People with personal agendas usually have a passion for them that can be difficult to deal with, especially with controversial issues like politics, channeling, psychic phenomena, or other New Age ideologies. These things can be detrimental to your group. As host, try to discover such agendas before inviting the person to join the group. People with personal agendas are often very good at hiding them until they find an audience. Occasionally a person may try to dominate a meeting by turning the discussion to some personal agenda or their preferred topic. The facilitator can overcome this problem by:

- Politely suggest that we stay on the topic for the meeting and not get sidetracked.
- Privately encourage the other members not to engage in the discussion of that person's agenda during or after the meeting. If nobody takes up the challenge, often a person will lose interest and may leave the group or learn to be more gracious.
- Offer to meet with the person after the meeting to provide a time for discussion of a pet issue. After respectfully listening to the person, politely request that this issue not be discussed during study group as you don't want to deflect the group from its main purpose of studying *The Urantia Book*. Explain that everyone comes for that purpose and it's essential to maintain it.

If all else fails, the host has the responsibility to take the disruptive person aside privately, and tactfully explain that the purpose of the group is to study *The Urantia Book* and that by introducing their personal agenda, they are disrupting the study of the others in the group. Directly ask this person not to bring the subject up again during the study period. It is important that the facilitator be patient and tolerant, but the host must also keep the interests of the group foremost in mind or the disruptive person will drive the others away. The group expects the host to function in this manner and to act when needed. Do not feel badly for it or apologize for doing what needs to be done.

Handling Controversy

As we have emphasized, avoid controversial issues, especially in new groups. A group with a more established relationship among its members may tread lightly into such areas but even then, caution is suggested. For example, someone may ask what *The Urantia Book* says about abortion. That is a legitimate question and yet it may cause discord. As long as the discussion is focused on book passages it may be a good discussion. However, should the talk turn political or adversarial, the host or facilitator should step in and conclude the discussion or divert the group to another subject.

The Urantia Book International School has a useful rule: "Interact with other students and teachers according to the spirit of the teachings of *The Urantia Book* by being respectful of differing levels of comprehension, diversity of perspective, and varied communication skills of fellow readers."

Perhaps repeating this rule occasionally at the beginning of a meeting would help prevent potential controversy or tension within the group. Overall, it is better to look for areas of

agreement in any group discourse, but never force a consensus in interpretation.

Creating Spiritual Unity

The search for God is the most important goal of any study group, and spiritual unity often results from the group's shared experience of this grand pursuit, conferring many benefits on members. Indeed, as the spiritual unity of the group strengthens, love among the group members grows. Other aspects of study group spiritual unity include the following:

- Membership stability allows familiarity and friendships to grow. A group of core members committed to attending every meeting will serve to unify the group. Familiarity with one another brings closeness and trust.
- Consider coming up with a name for your group. A name will give the group a sense of identity.
- Promote the idea that you and your group are part of a growing community of study groups around the world. Recognizing that you are part of this larger whole is inspiring and will serve to increase your spiritual unity.
- Do what you can to manifest genuine group governance. Toward this end, invite everyone to get involved in some aspect of hosting, planning, leading, or facilitating the group. Help those who tend to be spectators to know that they are valued members regardless of their level of participation. Lead the group in recognizing and investigating important issues in its process and hold sessions of fair and formal group decision-making.

Let us endeavor to build a sense of unity among all readers of *The Urantia Book*. The midwayers speak to this goal when they say:

> But in this brotherhood of Jesus there is no place for sectarian rivalry, group bitterness, nor assertions of moral superiority and spiritual infallibility. (195:10.14, 2085.6)

Engaging in Service Projects

Service is desirable and there are many ways that you can be of service in your community. Here are some suggestions for service projects:

- Prison ministry has been established by Urantia Association and needs volunteers in all communities.
- Contact Urantia Association Volunteers Committee or the Urantia organization of your choice to find out which projects need volunteers.
- *The Urantia Book* International School class facilitators. Perhaps your group could team-teach a course, with each lesson being the topic of your study group meeting.
- Engage in projects that help get books into spiritually hungry hands around the world.
- Host and conduct local or regional conferences, retreats, or picnics.
- Volunteer as a group at homeless shelters, hospitals, or for local emergency agencies. Groups that seek to extend themselves out into the community around them tend to grow and flourish. "One of the most important lessons to be learned during your mortal career is teamwork" (28:5).
- Help set up or start a new study group.

POSTSCRIPT: Building A Global Community of Study Groups

You are heartily welcomed to The Urantia Book Study Group community and we look forward to sharing this experience together. We cannot create thousands of study groups on Urantia without creating one study group at a time, and one of the goals of every progressive study group should be to create more groups.

Each new group will take on a life of its own with a loving and caring hand to nurture it. That said, we also invite you to help build a network of study groups around the world. This network is neither formal nor restrictive; it endeavors to provide an open doorway of meaningful communication among groups and also for individual readers in search of groups. Here are some important steps toward that goal:

Communities

Many countries have Urantia Association affiliates (national and local—check for one in your area). Such organizations may serve as a resource for guest speakers, gatherings of readers, help with difficult concepts from the book, or any other assistance you may need. Again, membership in Urantia Association, while welcomed, is not required to get assistance for having a successful study group. We support all groups who are dedicated to the study of *The Urantia Book*, are not political in their membership requirements, and do not practice ideologies that distract from a study of the teachings.

Once you have a study group established (in person or online), we would appreciate receiving updated information about your group at least once a year. News of any kind (along with photos) is welcomed and may be included with your permission in our newsletters as inspiration for others.

If you are open to new members, bear in mind that we can help them find you. Sometimes travelers contact us to find a study group in an area where they are vacationing or visiting. We often assist them in finding a study group they can attend. You may contact us at any time for assistance in finding new readers in your area or for any information you may need.

The Study Group Directory

The Urantia Book Study Group Directory (UBSGD) website is provided as a free and open service to readers of *The Urantia Book* to facilitate their connection with other readers for the purposes of collaborative study and spiritual fraternity, as well as for hosts to publicize their meetings.

Register with the Study Group Directory (see link below). Urantia Association, Urantia Foundation, and The Urantia Book Fellowship maintain this independent database, but membership in any of these organizations is not required for a listing in the Directory. The Directory is to serve all groups and students of *The Urantia Book*.

https://www.urantiastudygroup.org/en

ADDENDUMS

Addendum A: Checklist for Launching Your First Meeting

- Before considering creating and hosting your own study group, we recommend you first attend another study group to see how it works.
- Decide if you want to have an online or physical meeting or a combination of both.
- Evaluate the time required to host a study group. Do you have one evening a week?
- Discuss forming a study group with your family and other readers in your area.
- Make a dedicated personal commitment to host a study group.
- Prayerfully turn this decision over to the spiritual influences in and around you.
- Compile a list of names of potential study group members that you know. For online groups consider the time zones and look at the International Directory.
- Contact Urantia Association or National or Local affiliated organizations, for the names of readers and other study groups in your area. See Addendum B.
- If there are other nearby study groups, alert them about your intentions.
- Contact potential group members and invite them to attend.
- Finalize your invitation list. Organize a planning meeting. Determine a suitable time and location.
- Mail or email invitations to all the prospects on your list.
- A few days after they receive the invitation, follow up with an email or telephone call.
- A short time before the meeting, confirm all arrangements for the meeting place and time.
- Get there early so you can greet everyone as they arrive.
- Organize refreshments if possible.
- Start on time. Introduce yourself and state the purpose of the meeting.
- Present your thoughts and then ask for suggestions and ideas from your guests.
- Decide with the group where to meet, the time of the meeting, and how often to meet.
- Decide your method of study initially, knowing this may change as the group evolves.
- Make sure everyone knows the time, date, and place of the inaugural meeting.
- Send a message a few days before the inaugural meeting to remind everyone.
- Develop a plan for this meeting; study the paper to be covered; be prepared.
- As host, always be first to arrive. Aim to start and end on time.
- Act as the facilitator of the first meeting; realize that people will look to you to lead.
- If the discussion gets sidetracked, pull it back into focus on the paper being read.
- Don't let any person(s) dominate the meeting.
- Keep things moving but allow time for discussion. Encourage questions and sharing.

- Make sure everyone knows the time, date, place, and topic of the next meeting.

For online groups also consider the following:

- Make sure everybody has a suitable internet connection, a device (smartphone, tablet, laptop), a microphone and speaker (or headset) and if possible, a camera.
- Choose carefully which software you will use and make sure everybody is familiar with it.
- Make sure you know the security settings for the software or platform you are going to use.
- Make sure, if you're going to record the meeting, to ask for consent of the participants.
- Establish the protocols for the meeting regarding use of microphones and cameras to avoid noise and distracting behaviors.
- Have clear rules for participation, for instance raising hands to talk.
- Know the available versions/formats of *The Urantia Book* and the software you want to use to open it.

All groups of any kind start with one person committed to the success of the group. Do not be discouraged by low or even no attendance at first. Like all things of value, it takes time to create them. Become active and known in the Urantia community through online webinars, classes, and in person events. As more people get to know you, more people will want to join your group. Don't judge your success by the number of people attending but rather by the quality of the content and the value of the study to those who do attend.

> The weak indulge in resolutions, but the strong act. Life is but a day's work—do it well. The act is ours; the consequences God's. (48:7, 556.13)

Addendum B: Contact List for Study Group Assistance

This is the link of *the Urantia Book* Study Group Directory. Multiple languages are available: https://www.urantiastudygroup.org

Urantia Association International
4000 W. Montrose Ave. #606
Chicago, IL 60641 USA
Phone: +1 (773) 572-1180
centraloffice@urantia-association.org

Urantia Association International - Study Group Committee
studygroups@urantia-association.org

Urantia Foundation
533 Diversey Parkway
Chicago, IL 60614, USA
Call 1-800-URANTIA in the U.S (international callers: 1-773-525-3319)
urantia@urantia.org

Addendum C: Newsletter Article Submission

Any host or organizer of a study group is encouraged to submit news about your group and/or photos to Urantia Association. These may be stories about how you created or discovered your group, attracted new members, personal experiences, group projects, significant events, or current topics of study. With your permission, your story could be included in either *Tidings* or the *Journal*.

At this link: https://urantia-association.org/about-uai/contact-us/

Or to this email: centraloffice@urantia-association.org

If you would like to support the work of Urantia Association International, please visit our website to donate: https://urantia-association.org/get-involved/donate/