

Q&A with Diane Hockridge

Tim Collison: [00:00:00] Well, hello, everyone. It's nice to be joining you over a St. Mark's podcast. If we haven't met, my name is Tim and I'm the assistant curate here. I'm joined by Diane Hockridge, who is the educational designer for Ridley College in Melbourne. And we're just going to have a little bit of a chat about adult learning and particularly how it relates to leading a small group or a Bible study to help us think.

Tim Collison: beyond what the questions are and maybe how we engage people in thinking and talking about God's word together. Hello, Diane. How are you?

Diane Hockridge: Hi, Tim. I'm great.

Diane Hockridge: Well, in terms of just, my Christian story, I, I became a Christian in early high school, and since then I've moved around a bit and been involved in various churches and that's meant I've been involved in quite a few small groups as well. Some of those I've led. Along with my husband, David, and some of those, I've just been a member of the small group.

Diane Hockridge: Currently I'm living in Sydney, , and I go to St. Phil's Anglican Church in [00:01:00] Eastwood. And in terms of, of work, over the years I've done a variety of different things, but I suppose maybe for the last 20 years, my work's been related to Christian and theological education. Currently I'm the online educational designer at Ridley College.

Diane Hockridge: So that means I get to develop online courses in partnership with other faculty there, which I find really enjoyable. And I also help people at Ridley to think about how we can do our learning and teaching better and keep improving it.

Tim Collison: That's great. Thank you. And I'll give a quick plug, to Ridley here.

Tim Collison: If you want to do some online study, Ridley is a great place to do that. And you can even do some of the certificate stuff through St. Mark's. So ask me some questions if you'd like to know more about that. Not you, Diane, you know, lots about it, but you know, for those of you listening at St. Mark's, and I'm so excited to have this opportunity because I think we've all experienced that moment in small group.

Tim Collison: We have the dreaded silence. Someone's asked a question and people aren't sure how to answer it or [00:02:00] what to do. And it's so difficult when you're leading the small group to know what to do and how to engage because it's quite different to engaging a group of adults to children to, you know, when I lead at Sunday school is very different to leading in small group.

Tim Collison: So I thought the first question we'd ask is, is the structure of a Bible study or small group and I'll probably use those terms interchangeably. Is that, is the structure as important as the content?

Diane Hockridge: Good question, i, I think, you know, sitting on the fence, both structure and content are important, but I reckon what's probably most important for people to think about with their small group is the purpose of the group.

Diane Hockridge: Like why, what's your group for? Not all small groups or Bible studies are the same. So it's worth asking that question. Why are we having this small group? Why are we meeting? What are we hoping to achieve? I think generally, church small groups are great for encouraging and supporting each other as fellow Christians.

Diane Hockridge: It's sort of where, where things [00:03:00] get real and personal and where we can start really living out, what we believe and what we're learning about. And so, you know, even though we're learning together, it's, not primarily like a, a teaching didactic thing, like, listening to a sermon. Even though some small groups will be a bit like that, but, if we're clear about what we're focused about small group is what a purpose of a small group is, then those questions of structure and content, sort of flow naturally from that.

Tim Collison: I think that's really helpful. I love that idea that a small group, you've got to identify your purpose and that might be different for different groups in the church and a different age ranges.

Tim Collison: I think that's a really great thing. Our small groups could do is ask . What's our group for? The next question, I guess, coming out of that and specifically in how people learn. Now, this is a big question. You studied in this area, you probably can't draw it down to a short one, but as best as you can, can you tell us a little bit about how adults learn?

Diane Hockridge: Yes as you [00:04:00] say, that is a big question, Tim, and, there's a lot that could be said about it. But I just sort of thought I'd mention three things, for us to think about today. The first one is that adults tend to learn

better. When they can connect new things with what they already know. So, you know, we're called adults because we've lived long enough to have had a bit of experience.

Diane Hockridge: And so when we're working with adults, we can help them build on that experience and build on that sort of past knowledge. And I think it's important to, to respect that. When we're working with adults, realize that everyone has had that life experience already and involve people in the process and let them work things out for themselves, rather than sort of having a kind of a set answer that we're trying to work towards.

Diane Hockridge: And I think one way we can do that is to, to really focus on asking good questions and I wonder if, people have noticed how good Jesus is, at [00:05:00] connecting with what people already know and asking really good questions. He often uses a lot of questions and his questions are often, very sort of carefully designed to, demand some kind of personal response or commitment.

Diane Hockridge: So I think, you know, if we study what Jesus did in terms of asking questions, that's a good example for us in helping connect what we're learning. We can always learn lots from having a look at how Jesus interacted with people and the kinds of questions he asked, as we think about how can we, , really engage with people as adults and build on what they already know.

Diane Hockridge: So I think a second thing to remember about [00:06:00] adult learning is that as adults we like our learning to be relevant to our lives. We want to see how we can use this now and how it applies to my real life. So finding ways to connect what we're learning about with our lives is important, in our small groups.

Diane Hockridge: And perhaps there might be something concrete that we can encourage people in our group to do in response to the study. And sometimes that could be, some kind of a group thing that everyone does. They, they try out during the week and report back on, maybe a prayer practice or, you know, doing an act of random kindness, or taking a conversation a bit further than they normally would.

Diane Hockridge: If everyone sort of Tries to apply things in their lives and then reports back that can be a very, helpful and encouraging experience, I think adults like things to, be connected with what they already know and to be relevant to their lives. And then the third thing I'd say is, um. They like actually being connected [00:07:00] relationally.

Diane Hockridge: So learning is a relational thing. It's not just all head knowledge, is it? It's not just all about what's going on in our brains. And I think, again, we see Jesus here. He was so relationally oriented. As we read about, what he did, he spent a lot of time hanging out with his disciples. A lot of the teaching and conversations that have arose from things going on around them was a lot of informal and unstructured I think it can be really valuable for small groups to spend time together as a group in less formal ways to build those relationships, you know, maybe having dinners or doing activities together. Because as we build those relationships that builds trust, which helps us develop a sense of being a group, and then that opens up new opportunities for growing together.

Diane Hockridge: So they're just three of the things I've mentioned. There's plenty more we could say about adult learning, but, there's also, you can have a look, you can have a look on, [00:08:00] put it into Google. What are the principles of adult learning? And you'll probably find some helpful stuff

Tim Collison: I think that's really helpful, Diane, you know, and the three really similar, you know, connecting things with what they know that it's relevant to our lives and that we're connected relationally.

Tim Collison: I think they're things we can remember and think about as we prepare studies. And so I guess, I guess the flip side of that. What's a mistake that we may often make when we think about how adults learn or engage with material?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, look, I think, just sort of thinking on my own experience of, Bible studies in small groups, I think sometimes we can get, a little bit too focused on the structure,, and think we've just got to get through all the questions.

Diane Hockridge: And so we're sort of rushing from one thing to another, or similarly, we can be too content focused. But I think if we take into account those three aspects of adult learning that we just discussed, it's a good reminder that Our role as leaders in a group of adults is really as facilitators, you know, we're all in it together, we're [00:09:00] all growing together as members of Christ's body.

Diane Hockridge: So our job as leaders is, as far as possible, not to sort of go through the questions and get the right answers, but create a context where people can come together around the Bible and, and really sort of grapple with

what it's saying to us and support each other and applying God's word in our lives.

Diane Hockridge: So we're teachers, not facilitators. Or as, Drew Fitzgerald says, guides, not gurus. I find that a helpful phrase. And I think that bring, we can also come back to that question we talked about near the beginning about what's our goal. What do we want our small group to be like? And, and perhaps even ask our small group those questions and involve them in planning and setting those group goals and guidelines for the group.

Diane Hockridge: Because that's a great way to acknowledge that, experience of your group members and engage them in becoming part of the group. So that sort of respecting our group members as adults, I think is [00:10:00] really important. And, you know, people in your group. Have all sorts of skills, and experiences.

Diane Hockridge: They might have quite responsible jobs outside of, your, you know, your small group. So if we can find ways to, to remember that and acknowledge that as we meet together, that can be really helpful.

Tim Collison: I think that's a good idea. And I think as well, you know, being able to tap into people's experience, saying, you know, you're, you work in an office, how does that relate to, you know, your manager?

Tim Collison: How does that relate to what we're talking about here? You know, how Jesus talks to the rich young ruler who would have managed people and had well, you know, being able to connect to people's experiences, I think is a really important thing that I've observed in small groups that can help people really think and answer those questions.

Tim Collison: Well, yeah, and I guess what's it you've been in small groups, you know, about adult education, you what's something you've noticed about church small groups and how people engage with the material in those small groups.

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, I think, [00:11:00] well, perhaps I can share, some of my less positive experiences in small groups.

Tim Collison: That would be a great way to help us learn.

Diane Hockridge: Yeah. People might recognize these from their own experiences as well, perhaps, you know, I wonder if you've experienced the sort

of like the comprehension Bible study. That's where the questions are sort of tend to be closed or overly factually oriented questions or the leaders too focused on getting the right answer.

Diane Hockridge: I had a recent experience of this and it was, you know, it was a bit painful really. So, you know, an example of a closed question might be something like. What is, what was Jesus reply to the Pharisee's question in the first part of this chapter? Which is really just asking a factual question.

Diane Hockridge: Sometimes they're okay, but sometimes, you know, you might end up, as you said earlier, you know, you're talking about those awkward silences that we sometimes have in Bible studies. I think sometimes the awkward silences are, not because, No one knows the answer, but because the question is just too simplistic, and it seems, obvious, [00:12:00] so it's good to check out questions and weed out any overly simplistic ones.

Diane Hockridge: A second common problem, that other people might have come across as well is, you know, we have. One or two people that dominate, people who perhaps just like to talk a lot, or perhaps they don't like those pauses and gaps, and so they always jump in to fill them. Sometimes people feel like they need, they know more than others, and they feel the need to make sure everybody gets to hear what they have to say.

Diane Hockridge: So that can be really challenging, and you know, there's lots of strategies leaders can use. To deal with that, you know, like redirecting the question to another member of the group. And perhaps sometimes taking people aside if it, if it's, needs to be followed up a little bit further.

Tim Collison: That's great.

Tim Collison: I think, thank you for addressing the silencing. I think that's something most people have been in a small group or Bible study with a church have, have realized is that sometimes it is that silence and sometimes it's because people awkward. But I think. I [00:13:00] hadn't thought about that before you picked up that sometimes the silence is just because the question might be too simplistic and I think that it's helpful to think through and go through your study as you prepare and think actually is this a helpful question, you know, is it something that they will just know because we just read that passage together

Diane Hockridge: yeah. And I think we, we shouldn't be too scared of silences as well. I think we're not used to silence. We tend to sort of fill our, our lives

with lots of noise. But I know, from experience that, you know, some people, take a little bit longer to. to compose an answer.

Diane Hockridge: So it's okay to sort of leave that space. And if we leave that space, sometimes we'll, we'll get some really fruitful answers as people have had more time to think and sort of think about how they respond. And if we are asking good questions, then, you know, the answer isn't going to be obvious. So people might need the time to think.

Tim Collison: Absolutely. I remember, I don't know how much it relates to small groups. I remember when talking about prayer with one of our AFES [00:14:00] interns when I was at uni and I was like, you know, I've been told that you should wait seven seconds of silence. He's like, no, no, no. He's like, Tim, you've got to wait for 14 seconds of silence, 14 counts before you close the prayer.

Tim Collison: He's like, give people plenty of time, sometimes with difficult stuff to have an opportunity to pray. And I guess maybe in this sense speak.

Diane Hockridge: Yeah. Yeah.

Tim Collison: That's good advice. Hey, so I guess thinking about adult learning then, what are some things people who lead small groups or Bible study should know about running the study time itself?

Tim Collison: They've got their study. They're sitting there in the group. They've got their eager, engaged adults. What are some things that the leader of that group should know or think about? Well, yeah, again,

Diane Hockridge: there's lots that could be said here. Yeah, just a couple of thoughts that might be helpful. I think perhaps one of the challenges of leading adults is that over time, adults tend to develop ingrained patterns of thinking or habits of responding or set views.

Diane Hockridge: You know, we sort of get set in our ways. And [00:15:00] so sometimes you might need to, find ways to gently challenge those. But you know, making those kinds of changes is hard for people, so we need to acknowledge that and I think if as leaders we can share our own struggles and experiences, that may also help others to be open to, you know, thinking about changing.

Diane Hockridge: I mean, we're coming together to study God's word, and to encourage one another. And so, you know, Inherent in that is the idea that, you know, we're hoping that, we're going to become more Christlike and we're going to encourage each other to grow and change. So I suppose that's part of the focus of a Bible study anyway.

Diane Hockridge: But it can be hard to sort of push people that little bit further sometimes, I think. And that's, again, comes back to, you know, how well you know your group and, and how comfortable you are and how long you've been together and all those kinds of things. I reckon another thing practically is just, it's good to mix things up a bit in terms of how we do Bible studies.

Diane Hockridge: So I was in a small group, that had [00:16:00] been going together for quite a while. And we usually, we did this sort of usual thing, often following the church Bible studies, we'd have, you know, a written set of questions and we'd work through them. We would often take it in turns to lead. So that was, that was good as well.

Diane Hockridge: But then we decided, let's, let's do something different. Let's, you know, watch some videos together. And, and do our Bible study that way. So that just made it a bit more interesting, sort of mixing things up a bit. Creative people might want to think about, you know, using stories, or pictures or something like that.

Diane Hockridge: Depending on who's in your group. And I think one more thing I just briefly mention is just keep in mind that there might be some sort of, common learning problems that people in your group might have, like dyslexia or perhaps they're on the autism spectrum or something like that. So just be aware of those things, where your group's at, and maybe you might need to modify some things about what we ask people to do. For example, [00:17:00] asking someone to read the Bible aloud might be, you know, quite a difficult thing for them. So yeah, just keep in mind that, that we may encounter some of those common learning problems.

Diane Hockridge: And if, if you do have people in your group, say with dyslexia or something, then yeah, find out what that means for them, and, what they're comfortable and not comfortable with.

Tim Collison: Thanks for a really great point you finished up with and the answer that I think thinking about the accessibility of how we lead a study is an important thing.

Tim Collison: I haven't thought about that before, but I think that's actually as I sit there and think, yeah, I do know people who don't love it when they're asked to read the Bible in public. And sometimes it can be awkward to refuse. So, so knowing who to ask, I know your study members is important. Yeah. And I guess what do people leading the study need to think about beyond asking questions to create a study which really helps the members grow in their faith?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, I think, you know, that as we were saying, that sort of, you know, our goal to help people grow in their faith. So yeah, keeping finding ways to encourage people to really apply it and, and do some [00:18:00] action in response. We as leaders might need to lead by example here. Doing some kind of group action can be a great thing, and fun as well as impactful.

Diane Hockridge: So I've had some groups where we've decided we're going to engage in some kind of service activity together for the church or for the local community, like cooking meals or helping out at church maintenance days or something. So that can really help the group dynamics. But it can also be a way of actually practicing, what we're learning about and putting it into practice by serving others.

Diane Hockridge: And I think, you know, praying for your group is, you know, kind of almost goes without saying, but we should say it. It's important to, to pray. For your group as the leader, and also to, spend time in prayer together, and, and follow up with each other on those prayer points. You know, sometimes, at the end of groups, we all, we will, maybe we'll have a prayer time and we'll share prayer points and we'll pray and then we don't actually follow [00:19:00] up on it.

Diane Hockridge: You know, how did that go last week? How is your brother? We were praying for or, you know, how did your presentation go or whatever it was. One thing we did with another group I was in a few years back to was we set up prayer partners within the group. And, you know, that really made such a difference for our group.

Diane Hockridge: So we just allocated everybody a partner. And then, encourage them to share prayer points with each other and then, follow up on it with each other during the week. And that made a real difference to the, the, the group dynamics, and people really feeling connected and feeling more like they were aware of where everyone was at.

Tim Collison: I think, I think that's a great idea. And so did you, was the expectation that they would meet with their prayer partner or they just kind of text or WhatsApp or phone call, maybe depending on the generation?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, yeah, we left it open for people to decide what they wanted to do. And, you know, because of group numbers, we actually ended up with [00:20:00] one or two triplets, I think, as well as partners.

Diane Hockridge: So that would be another. thing, a triplet or a partner. So yeah, I think where the minimum thing was that we sort of said share your prayer points, and, and then follow up, with one another. And sometimes we'd set aside time within the group time to do that. Like we're now going to break up into our prayer partners.

Diane Hockridge: So tell each other your prayer requests for the week. And sometimes we'd leave it to happen outside the group. So some people met together, physically and others just, yeah, did the WhatsApp or the phone calls or whatever.

Tim Collison: I really like that. That's a, I mean, prayer is such a way. I think it teaches us as we pray, we both hear from God, but it also helps us understand God.

Tim Collison: And if we're praying for people, I think it particularly helped us shape and love how we, how we interact and feel towards them. Yeah. Yeah. I guess. So if there's one takeaway, you're small group leaders, I'm preparing a study to engage with adults. What would it be?

Diane Hockridge: Yes, look, this is a good question, Tim.

Diane Hockridge: It's always hard [00:21:00] to say one thing, isn't it? You know, we talked about content and structure and purpose and understanding adults. And they're, they're all important. But I think most important is that as leaders, we learn to love the people in our small group. , you know, in so many of the New Testament epistles, we are urged to keep loving one another and caring for one another.

Diane Hockridge: So I, I think, Romans 12 verses 9 and 10, could be a good motto for our small groups. It says, love must be sincere, hate what is evil, cling to what is good, be devoted to one another in love, honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord.

Diane Hockridge: And I think, you know, that could be a great picture of, you know, what a great small group could be like, where we do love one another sincerely and where we respect one another as, you know, fellow adults. And then that leads to us, continuing to be strong in our [00:22:00] faith and, keeping our spiritual fervor.

Diane Hockridge: Yeah. So that's what I encourage people to do.

Tim Collison: I think I really like that as an answer. Now, I was, as we were talking, I thought of a couple of questions I didn't prep you with. Are you happy if I ask them and if you don't, you know, we can leave them or you can answer them as you, as you see fit.

Tim Collison: Sure.

Tim Collison: So I, I was also thinking as a, we talked a lot about leading cause you know, I, I did want to help particularly leaders prep and, and think through it, but we have people who will lead and then be a member. How do you be a good member? What's being a good member of a small group? Particularly if someone's leading a study, how do you, I guess, be a supportive listener and what's a way to be a good participant in a small group?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, that's a, that is a good question. I think perhaps you know, if you've led small groups before, you, you might, you know, have some clues about being a better participant because you, you know what it's like, when you're leading. I suppose being supportive of the, the person who's leading, you know, not sort of, disagreeing with them, unless it's [00:23:00] necessary to disagree with them, but you know, just sort of generally trying to sort of support them, not being that dominating person, so not feeling like you've got to jump in and answer everything. But perhaps, yeah, perhaps sort of trying to add a comment to what somebody else has said or trying to take things a little bit further can be helpful. Yeah, that's, they're the things that come to mind.

Tim Collison: No, that's really helpful.

Tim Collison: Thank you. I think especially like I know myself, I'm always tempted to be the one who answers the question because I'm one of those people who's afraid of silence when I'm not leading the study. So that's very helpful. And I think as well, I guess the other question I had, like, like most churches at St. Mark's, you know, our small groups are probably divided up by age, you know, we have young adults in a great way And we have different families and

stuff like that is, is that actually with adult thinking about how adults learn, is it actually a benefit to having quite a wide variety of ages in a small group, or is it best to kind of have people, you know, in a [00:24:00] generation together?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, look, I think there's probably pros and cons of both of those. So one of the advantages of, of being in a similar generation is, you know, you're going to have similar, issues, similar views on things perhaps to some extent. But there's a lot of richness also in having that cross generational, interaction.

Diane Hockridge: So that can be really beneficial as well. And I think that's one of the special things about churches that we do have different generations in them, don't we? And, you know, just having that perhaps an older, wiser person or an older, wiser kind of couple, can be really beneficial for some younger people.

Diane Hockridge: So maybe not even having that, you know, all the time, maybe we can find ways of bringing the different small groups together into a , on occasions that will give us that, that generational sort of interaction.

Tim Collison: I think that's great. I really value when I was younger, I was in a group of people. From about probably 18 to about late twenties, but the leaders were [00:25:00] people in their sixties, and that was such a good group to be in for, I mean, there were great leaders, so maybe it was just that there were great leaders, but it felt like the generational gap was actually really helpful for all of us.

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, yeah, I was thinking then too that I had an experience as a sort of a late teenager, I think I probably was in a youth Bible study. , but we would have the Bible study, at a sort of, I suppose they were like a middle aged couple, at their house. Just their, you know, their hospitality and the fact that they were strong Christians and they, you know, they enjoyed spending time with young people.

Diane Hockridge: That was a really good, model. , and, and really, you know, they just gave freely of their time. And I think that was really beneficial for me as a young Christian to see that.

Tim Collison: I think so too. It can be a really powerful thing if you can set that up as a church, I think. It's definitely something there for me to keep thinking about.

Tim Collison: And as we finish up, Diane, you've been really helpful with lots of knowledge. If people want to follow up on this topic, particularly thinking through how do I lead a small group [00:26:00] well, what are some resources that, that leaders and people leading studies could engage with around this topic?

Diane Hockridge: Yeah, look, I mean, there's a really good little book that Karen and Rod Morris put together called Leading Better Bible Studies.

Diane Hockridge: So, you know, I asked a couple of people, , in the last few days about what they would recommend and there were several people recommended that book. So that's good. It's got a section on adult learning principles in it. So, I think that's probably one of the best ones. Also a former lecturer at Readley College, Andy Abernathy.

Diane Hockridge: He's, he's now a lecturer in, the States. But he recently wrote a book called Savoring Scripture. So it's more intended for sort of like. students studying at a Bible college, but it's got some really good stuff about how we can learn about Scripture together. So if people are looking for something more about how to maybe, put together Bible studies or, you know, how to really engage with [00:27:00] Scripture, that book would be good for that.

Diane Hockridge: I think there's also, I mean, there's, of course, there's lots of stuff, you know, if you Google how to lead a small group,, I did find one and I can share that with you, Tim. Um it's the right now media website. And they had a really good short article on characteristics of an effective small group leader.

Tim Collison: That's, that's great, Diane. I, it's, I mean, leading better Bible studies is great. I've read it. , Andy was a great lecturer. I had him at Ridley. So I think they're great recommendations. I'll look forward to that website and Diane, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us a little bit about adult learning and particularly how it relates to engaging with adults through small groups.

Tim Collison: I think I've learned a lot. I know our small group leaders and members will learn a lot. So thank you so much for taking the time to do that.

Diane Hockridge: It's been a pleasure. Thanks for having me Tim.