

CMF Reading Groups: A Guide

I have benefitted enormously by being part of a CMF reading group for over three years. For most of that time I've also been the group 'administrator' and in this short guide you will find an explication of what a reading group is and find all the tools you may need to start your own one! I hasten to add that this is indeed a *guide* and by no means a prescriptive formula, just a collection of tips learned along the way 😊

What is the point of a reading group?

A reading group is a means of deliberately engaging with and tackling some of the big issues that concern us Christians involved in healthcare. Of course, there are many ways that this can be done but I think there are two great advantages of reading groups over other media:

1. You really get to *dig deep* into particular topics by reading a whole book about them as opposed to a reading short article or listening to a talk.
2. You have the opportunity to regularly *discuss* these issues with other people, bounce ideas off each other, be challenged by something you hadn't thought of, or even just clarify your own thoughts through the process of expressing them out loud.

Prof John Wyatt talks about how John Stott would use the metaphor of a bridge to describe the reading groups that they used to participate in together. He would talk about how Christians have a radically different worldview to the prevailing culture that surrounds us; we are in the world but not of it. Sometimes communicating with the secular world, both understanding it and making ourselves understood, can feel like building a bridge between two different lands. All good bridges need firm foundations on *both sides* to work effectively. This is the point of a reading group, to build those foundations. To search for Christian perspectives on tricky issues and to better understand secular culture.

How does it work?

We choose a topic or theme and then decide on *two books* to read, one that comes from a Biblical Christian perspective and another that reflects the attitudes of contemporary Western secularism. Everybody reads both books before the reading group and then during the meeting itself we discuss and ask each other questions such as:

- Did you like the books? How did they make you feel? Encouraged, afraid, shocked, confused etc.
- Was there anything new that you had not known or considered before?
- What did you agree or disagree with in the books?
- How would you describe the worldview of the author behind each of these books?
- What are the similarities between the two books? What would both authors agree on?
- What are some of the key differences between the arguments presented in the two books?

- If the authors were here in this room now, what would you say to or ask them?
- Why is it that some people might find it difficult to accept or engage with a Biblical Christian worldview on this topic?
- How can we as Christians help to 'build that bridge' in communicating a Christian perspective of this topic to our non-Christian friends/colleagues etc?
- Are there any weaknesses that you can identify in the author's argument or treatment of the topic? This applies to the Christian book as much as the non-Christian one
- Have the books challenged or encouraged you to think or do anything differently that will affect your everyday life?

What topics should we read and talk about?

Anything that interests you really! Ideally, since it's a CMF group, try and choose a topic that is not only relevant to Christians but also has a medical angle. At the end of the guide you will find a list of all the topics and books that we have covered in the group I'm part of.

We've found it useful to discuss and decide on the next theme (as well as date) at the end of every meeting. That way every member can share their ideas and it's one less job for the administrator to do!

How do we decide which books to read?

This is actually quite important! Don't be afraid of reading something that a member of the group has already read; it is actually desirable if someone can vouch for a particular book. Don't hesitate to check out CMF literature and book reviews for ideas or even just ask them directly.

Try to avoid obscure books/authors that nobody has heard of. I only say this because I remember a couple of instances when we had chosen our theme and I was trying to find some suitable books. There were a couple that seemed great on Google but after I bought and read them to check, they were not at all what we were looking for and would have been rubbish for our meeting!

Don't forget that you don't have to choose the theme before the books. It might be that a great book has just come out on a juicy topic and you want to talk about it with a Christian/secular companion book. It may not even be on exactly the same topic; the key thing is that the two works represent different worldviews.

Sometimes it is difficult to find suitable books for particular topics. Though I think books are definitely the first choice, there is no rule against using other media such as a collection of articles, an online lecture, or even a film!

Who should be in the group?

The group I'm in is mainly for junior doctors and students. However, having a mix of people with different perspectives is always good, especially if you have some older people who are maybe more experienced and knowledgeable.

However, by far the most valuable attribute of any member is *commitment*. People who will commit to actually *read* the books and actually *turn up* for the meetings. Having the same group of people each time (with the occasional absences of course) is crucial for group cohesion which I talk more about now...

Food and venue?

The treasure of reading groups is in their communal nature. It's not just about learning, but doing so in community and fellowship with other believers, edifying one another. This is why food is such a good idea. Having a lunch, dinner or brunch at some point during the meeting is a great way of bringing people together and building relationships.

For the same reason, though a reading group can in theory happen anywhere, it is desirable to meet in somebody's home. Some people have the impression that reading groups are only for very serious or posh people. This is a problem because we want to everyone to feel like they can join! Welcoming somebody into a home with a plate of food before the any discussion begins is a great way of doing this.

As well fostering intellectual growth, reading groups can be great opportunities to practice Christian hospitality and community.

Timings for meetings: when, how long, how often?

The group that I'm part of meets on Saturday afternoons which seems to work pretty well because weekday evenings are less reliable and people often go to church at different times on Sunday. It also allows people plenty of time to travel if they are coming from far away.

We usually start with a light lunch around 12.30 for about half hour before sitting down to talk and closing with prayer around 16.00-16.30. That may sound like too long but do allow plenty of unrushed time for discussions. With a good topic and good books, we often feel like we could go on for much longer!

We usually have our meeting every 3-4 months. I think this is a good balance because it's not a huge commitment and gives people time to read the books but on the other hand it's frequent enough that the group has some momentum.

What is the role of the administrator?

The job of administrator is super easy, you just need to keep people informed about the next meeting. Since my group includes food, I also make sure I know how many are coming so I can notify our host beforehand.

Of course there is no one way to organise anything, but here is a breakdown of what I do and some tips:

- I keep my mailing list in a Google Sheets file so I can access and amend it from anywhere (e.g. I meet someone at a conference who wants to join, I add them to the list then and there on my phone). I record people's full names, email addresses, phone numbers and occupations
- Whenever you send out a group email, it is good practice put the mailing list addresses in the *Bcc* category. This is to avoid data protection hassle, getting consent from everybody to share their emails etc.
- In every email I send, I attach a PDF sheet containing all the details of the next meeting (theme, books, date, time, location, link to sign-up). I find this easier than writing in the body of the email every time since I can save a copy in my laptop and use the same template for each meeting
- Don't bombard people with too many emails but do keep them informed. I usually send an email just after a meeting announcing the details of the next one. I send another about a month later just to remind people to read the books (they often forget!). Then a few days before a meeting I send another reminder and confirm that the meeting is indeed happening. In each email, I attach the aforementioned PDF with all the details
- For registering people's attendance, I use Google Forms which I ask people to fill in via a link I put in the PDF file. This way I avoid a torrent of emails in my inbox from people saying whether or not they can come
- Don't neglect mobile numbers and make sure people have yours. Best way for last minute communication about people running late, not being able to come etc
- In every email I always invite any questions or concerns and give people the opportunity to 'unsubscribe' if they can no longer be part of the group

Conclusion

So I hope you have a better idea now of all the benefits of reading groups and how easy it is to start and run one. Below you will find some information about the books my group has done in the past and an example of the information sheets I email out.

Some examples of past topics and reading materials

As you'll see, some of the pairings weren't really on the same topics and even when they were, some of the topics were a bit rogue and hardly medical... but I would wholeheartedly recommend anything on this list, some truly smashing books!

Theme	Christian book	Secular book
Medical ethics	<i>Bioethics</i> (Gilbert Meilander)	<i>Rethinking Life and Death</i> (Peter Singer)
-	<i>The Gospel in a Pluralist Society</i> (Lesslie Newbigin)	Enhancing Evolution (John Harris)
-	<i>The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue</i> (James W. Sire)	<i>Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom</i> (Ronald Dworkin)
Transgender	<i>Understanding Gender Dysphoria</i> (book by Mark Yarnhouse)	<i>The Danish Girl</i> (film directed by Tom Hooper starring Eddie Redmayne)
The internet/social media/digital technology	<i>The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Revolution</i> (Tim Challies)	<i>The Shallows</i> (Nicholas Carr)
The future of the world and humanity!	<i>Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, The Resurrection and the Future of the Church</i> (N. T. Wright)	<i>Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow</i> (Yuval Noah Harari)
-	<i>Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées</i> (Peter Kreeft)	<i>Unfit for the Future: The Need for Moral Enhancement</i> (Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu)
Social justice	<i>Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes us Just</i> (Timothy Keller)	<i>The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World</i> (Michael Marmot)
Artificial Intelligence	<i>The Robots are Coming: Us, Them and God</i> (Nigel Cameron)	<i>Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence</i> (Max Tegmark)

Copy of one of my PDF files:

CMF Reading Group 3rd February 2018 - AI

Dear all,

Already part of our present in so many ways and set to play an even bigger role in the future world we will all inherit, **artificial intelligence** is a crucial issue for our times.

As the technology advances, it is becoming increasingly present in media, art and literature (<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/dec/03/robot-will-see-you-now-sex-robots-coming-godless-chinese-burn-review>). How can we as Christians begin to think Biblically about this overwhelming complicated issue? Come along to the next CMF reading group to find out!

- **The Robots are Coming: Us, Them and God** (*Nigel Cameron*)
- **Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence** (*Max Tegmark*)

Date and time: Saturday **3rd February 2018**, start with light lunch at **12.30** and finish around **16.00**

Venue: *[address]*

You are very welcome to attend (even if it's your first time!) and if you can commit to reading the two main books and plan to come, please register your attendance (mainly for catering purposes) here: <https://goo.gl/forms/KknxFVUKjqD23ubz1>

If longer wish to receive these emails or be part to this reading group for whatever reason, do let me know.

Feel free to contact me directly with any questions. Hope you can join us!

[name]

[my email address and phone number]