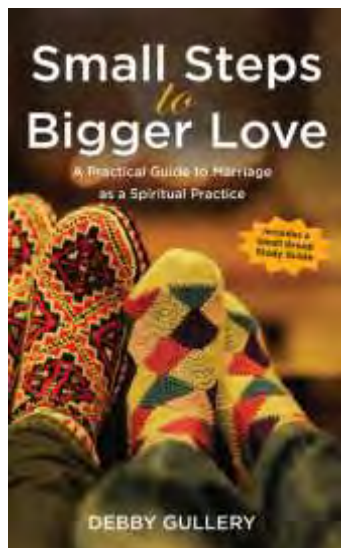


Rock Your Marriage Small Group and Book

Debby Gullery
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Last year I wrote a book entitled *Small Steps to Bigger Love: A Practical Guide to Marriage as a Spiritual Practice*. I wrote it because helping people improve their marriages is my passion, and I wanted to share some of the tools I've been teaching couples in my marriage workshops and in my couple coaching. I also wanted a book that would be easy to use for individuals, for couples and for small groups, so each of the chapters are fairly short, and have spiritual practices and exercises for people to do to help them implement the new ideas and tools right away. And the back of the book includes a simple study guide, for people who want to work on their marriages in a small group format.

Since I am the local Blessed Family Ministry representative in Westchester, NY, I thought I would sponsor a six-week small group on marriage and use my book to experience for myself if it can be helpful. I chose to make it 6 weeks, because I know that people are busy and thought it would be less of a commitment with a limited time period. When I was introducing the idea at church, I explained that it could be just as much of a learning experience to attend without a spouse as with, and encouraged people to come anyway.



Breakout sessions during the final meeting of the local, six-week program

I think that made a big difference, because up until the day of the first meeting, only two couples had signed up, but after my announcement, about twenty people showed up for the group, some with their spouses and some not. We met about 15 minutes after Sunday Service concluded, to give people a chance to get a bite to eat or a cup of coffee, and to socialize. I wanted to make it easy to attend so we aimed for an hour for each meeting. We began with a prayer, and then read over the recommended guidelines for successful small groups, which focus on confidentiality and respectful communication. The hardest part was deciding which topics to choose from the book, but because marriage as a spiritual practice is a main theme of the book, we started there.

Over the next few weeks, we read about and discussed topics like commitment, faith differences, generous listening, careful speaking, dealing with problems and the importance of fun. Each meeting we would read a short chapter, and then read the spiritual practices and/or the discussion questions from the study guide. Sometimes we did pair shares, or couple conversations, sometimes we broke into small groups of 4 or 6 people. I usually gave them homework to do – again based on the spiritual practices and suggestions from the study guide, and we spent the first few minutes of each meeting reporting what people had learned from doing the homework.



Couples discuss reading assigned during the week in small groups

After the first week, one of the husbands wrote me an email to tell me that he had never realized that other couples went through the same things that he and his wife went through, and learning that helped him to normalize his challenges. I think that is one of the greatest benefits to working on our marriages in a small group environment – we learn from each other, and we help each other laugh at our common weaknesses, encourage mutual vulnerability and support each other's tiny victories.

Each week we got closer to each other as we shared our stories and experiences, and each week we learned something about ourselves or our spouses, and gained a healthier perspective on marriage as a spiritual path. I was so inspired by the honesty and spiritual courage each person displayed in the group, and I'm pretty sure it made God happy too! Together, we were determined to "Rock Our Marriages."