



Building an Intentional Small Group Ministry

Resources Written and Curated for The Episcopal Church

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THE WAY OF LOVE
Practices for Jesus-Centered Life

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

AUTHORS

Jerusalem Greer

Staff Officer for Evangelism
The Episcopal Church

Charlotte Hand Greeson

*Associate for Building Faith and Program Coordinator for Mentoring
Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary*

The Rev. Canon Dr. Stephanie Spellers

Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism, Reconciliation and Creation
The Episcopal Church

The Rev. Becky Zartman

Canon Missioner for Welcome and Evangelism
Christ Church Cathedral, Houston

With contributions from:

Andrea Farley

Canon for Discipleship
The Episcopal Diocese of Spokane

Christian Gillette

Canon for Evangelism and Discipleship
Episcopal Diocese of San Diego

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The Episcopal Church
815 2nd Ave
New York, NY 10017

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PART 1: WHY SMALL GROUPS

- Informed by Scripture
- Informed by Tradition
- Informed by Formation
- Informed by Culture
- Informed by Evangelism

PART 2: HOW TO BEGIN

- Roles
 - Ministry Coordinator
 - Group Leaders
 - Group Co-Leaders
 - Clergy
- Process for Forming Groups
 - How Will Members Join?
 - How to Sort Members into Groups
 - What Is the Timeline?
 - Where Will People Meet?
 - Kids
 - Sharing Meals
 - Commitment
 - Marks of an Effective Small Group

PART 3: GATHERINGS

- Building Group Norms
 - Why Do We Need Norms?
 - When to Set Norms
 - Issues to Consider
- Sample Session Structure
 - Meal
 - Prayer
 - Check-In
 - Scripture and Wisdom
 - Follow-Through
 - Worship
 - Closing

FAQs

RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

A disciple is one who learns and patterns her life after that of the one she follows. We who take on the name “Christian” are disciples and followers of Jesus. Again and again, Jesus invited people to step onto the road with him, promising that if they followed, it would change their lives and change the world.

He offered that invitation to the first disciples, the brothers and fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew. “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fish for people.” In Mark 2, he sees Matthew in the tax booth. “Follow me,” he calls out, and Matthew leaps to go. They follow because they sense the fullness of God in Jesus, and they want to experience that fullness for themselves.

Christians have been answering that call for millennia. Together, we disciples make up the Jesus Movement, the ongoing community of people who follow him and grow in loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, each other, and the earth...all in the pattern of Jesus.

For many of us, church is so busy we don’t have a chance to focus on this kind of following, discipling, and growth in the Way of Love. There are so many details to tend to and so many meetings to attend, and that’s before you consider the non-church responsibilities tugging at our sleeves. Getting to worship at all is an accomplishment, and we expect it to be the principal site for prayer, formation, scripture reflection, fellowship, and service.

But when we get quiet, lots of us admit to a yearning. We want **more**.

Back in the 1700s, John and Charles Wesley felt the same need. The brothers were good Anglicans – neither ever renounced their priesthood in the Church of England – but they agreed that growing a full life with God takes beautiful worship and intentional spiritual practice in small groups and service with the least of these. They craved the “strangely warmed hearts” and spiritual vitality of the early church.

The Wesley descendants eventually became Methodist Episcopalians and then just Methodists. But their wisdom and the yearning behind it never really left the Episcopal or Anglican fold. Across the Communion today, there is an energetic movement for intentional discipleship, what Anglicans everywhere call “Jesus-Shaped Life.” The Episcopal incarnation of that movement is the Way of Love, an intentional commitment to following Jesus centered on seven practices that shape us into his likeness. All these efforts spring from a common, growing, and urgent realization that being Christian is about having a God-saturated life. Not just inside the building. Not just for an hour on Sunday. Not just in meetings of the whole congregation.

There is no better way to grow and practice the Jesus Way than in our homes, in our day-to-day lives, with a circle of followers who love and mentor one another as apprentices in the Jesus Way. That has been true all along (note the practice of church in the Book of Acts

and its numerical and spiritual growth). Particularly in this present moment, when pandemic has stripped away the trappings that usually surround church, small discipleship groups and neighborhood circles may be the most practical way for us to walk the path to love, freedom, and abundant life that Jesus laid out.

In June 2020, the Presiding Bishop's Evangelism Team hosted an online convening of church leaders passionate about small discipleship groups, to find out what they are learning during this time of displacement and dispersal. Several said they could tell the difference between members who simply worship and those who also take part in a small discipleship group. The small group participants were a little more spiritually grounded, much more connected, less likely to act out, more generous and helpful with other members, and more likely to engage in acts of blessing.

There is nothing scientific about these observations, but they actually make lots of sense. People tend to develop new habits and disciplined ways of life when they are in an accountable relationship. Studies tell us that accountability decreases if the group is more than 12 people. So if you want to follow Jesus and experience whole-life transformation, it helps to have a regular worship community and a consistent small group of disciples with whom you gather and share life.

Luckily, there's not one form of small group that works best. Even during physical distancing restrictions (this packet was written amid the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic), some households are forming discipleship circles at home (often intergenerational). Some neighbors meet physically in homes or outside, at appropriate distance. Many connect over digital platforms such as Zoom and report surprising degrees of spiritual intimacy as they share from the safety of their homes.

As congregations prepare for reentering church buildings, we know there will be limits on the number of people who can be present at any given time. In other words, we will be gathering in small groups. There has never been a better time to bring intention, shape, and support to small-scale gatherings of followers of Jesus.

While the forms may differ, there are some best practices. This booklet introduces those practices and models, to help you to form healthy, vibrant circles of people who share life in Christ. The basics include...

1. Gathering 'round for prayer and a meal – even over a digital platform, if needed;
2. Sharing briefly where and how God is showing up in your life;
3. Reflecting together on scripture and wisdom and their intersection with our everyday lives;
4. Closing with prayer, thanksgiving, and worship.

If anyone needs “proof” that this simple formula works, point to Acts 2:42-47. Following the Pentecost experience, the Spirit pushed the disciples out into the surrounding communities. Their goal was not to go to church but to be the church. They shared in teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, and temple worship. They offered healing love, good news, and signs

and wonders with neighbors. They blessed one another with resources held in common, so that none had need. They turned their lives over to God. And that branch of the Jesus Movement grew like wildfire.

If we make a similar pivot in this season of disruption, we could come out stronger than ever. We might become less an institution, and more what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry describes as a Jesus Movement: the ongoing community of people who believe in the power of God's love to change lives and change the world. We might live more fully as movement people who follow and share in the life of the revolutionary savior who started it all, Jesus Christ. We pray it may be so, especially in this moment of disruption and possibility.

The Holy Spirit is not finished with us. This chapter in the story of our life with God might have only just begun.

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers

June 2020

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

The suggestions, practices, and theories in this packet are broadly relevant to in-person, safely-distant, and online gatherings. We realize some adjustments will need to be made depending on the type of group you are hosting, and we trust that you will approach these materials with a spirit of innovation and imagination. While we know this packet is not the exhaustive authority on how to lead or participate in a small group, we hope that it will answer some of your questions and inspire you as you build your own life-giving, loving, and liberating intentional small group ministry with joy and faithfulness.

PART I: WHY SMALL GROUPS

The purpose of a faith-based small group is to build trusting relationships with God and one another. When we meet each other for conversation, practice, and prayer, we learn how to love. Call it a small group, discipleship circle, neighborhood group, life group, or cell gathering – whatever the name, a small group provides space for prayerful support and accountability as we seek to live the Jesus Way. Your small group may be a new discipleship group, or you may decide to add a new level of intention to a circle like the Vestry, a Bible study group, a teen youth group, Episcopal Church Women, a Brotherhood of St. Andrew chapter, or Altar Guild. The point is, God works on us in powerful ways in the context of a small, intentional, dedicated group of disciples.

Why do we believe small groups are so important? We can point to five sources of legitimacy: scripture, tradition, formation, culture, and evangelism. In the rest of this section, we look at how each informs our understanding and practice of small group ministry.

Informed by Scripture

We find examples of small groups throughout scripture, specifically in Jesus's own ministry and in the life of the early church. Consider these three passages:

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

—Luke 6:12-16

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

—Acts 2:42-47

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

—Hebrews 10:24-25

Informed by Tradition

Our baptismal identity is rooted in community and love. Upon our baptism, we commit to turn and follow Jesus, to leave behind whatever fosters selfishness, and to nourish that which brings to life God’s dream for us and for the world.

The Episcopal Church’s Baptismal Covenant (p. 305 of the Book of Common Prayer) begins with the promise to be like that early church: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” We go on to promise to resist evil, to proclaim good news in word and deed, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, to strive for peace and justice, to respect the dignity of every human being.

We take up these promises not once, but over and over, every time we renew our baptism. Together, these promises point to the way we are to love and be loved, to know and be known, to serve and be served ... within the context of community. Intentional faith-based small groups are an important place for us to live out our commitments, grounded in accountability and surrounded by the encouragement of others who share the journey.

Informed by Formation

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

—Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Throughout scripture, from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 to the letters of the Apostles to the early church, we know that being a disciple of Jesus requires intentional moments of study, reflection, and action – both individually and within community. In order to fully embody the love of Jesus and God’s dream for this world (the ultimate liberation we were all created for), we cannot just accrue knowledge alone. The wisdom of scripture and the prophets must be studied, wrestled with, internalized, reflected upon, and then put into living practice, not just once, but for a lifetime. What we know from education theory is that this sort of formation is best accomplished within a layered system – individual study, a greater learning community, and a small relationship-based cohort.

God longs for us to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and might. Small groups teach us how to love in a way that individual study and a greater learning community alone cannot. Small groups help us to connect what we’ve learned in our minds to our souls and our hearts,

and then give us the encouragement to love God with all of our might. When formation engages each part of the person, disciples can begin to live fully into their faith.

Informed by Culture

The only thing God called “not good” in the initial act of creation was a human being alone.

—Kendall Vanderslice, *We Will Feast*

One of the fastest growing areas of concern for healthcare providers is what author and pastor Emily D. Scott calls “modern loneliness.” Thanks to the internet and social media, we are now more connected to the chatter of the larger world than ever before. At the same time, we are drastically less connected with each other’s hearts and minds. This shows up in staggering statistics. In a 2018 survey, Cigna and Ipsos studied 20,000 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. Almost half reported feeling alone (40%) or left out (47%). One in four (27%) felt they were not understood. Two in five (43%) felt relations were not meaningful and they felt isolated (43%). Generation Z (those born after about 1995) was found to be the loneliest generation. And social media use alone is not a predictor of loneliness; the true predictor is lack of human connectedness.

Going back to our very Creation narrative, we see that humans have always needed relational community. In fact, Godself exists within community as the Trinity. As creatures made in the image of God, we, too, long for deep connection with others. Intentional faith-based small groups that include the offering and receiving of stories (what we call “StorySharing”) can play a huge role in addressing the cultural and spiritual hunger for relational intimacy.

Informed by Evangelism

One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.

—Luke 5:17-20

The purpose of a faith-based small group is to build relationships with God and one another. When we meet each other in less-formal, honest, and compassionate conversation, we learn how to love better. And this love is what will bring us into loving, liberating, and life-giving relationships with God, each other, and our own truest selves. Small groups are a wonderful way to invite both those outside your church walls and those new to your church into community. They are a low-risk, high-impact opportunity to seek, name, and celebrate what Jesus is doing in our lives and in the lives of people around us. A small group may be the ideal space for inviting people near and far to go deeper into the practice of sharing life with each other and with God.

PART 2: HOW TO BEGIN

ROLES

As with any ministry or program, it is key to have the right leadership for the task. Two basic tenets of adult education are 1) adults learn best when they are involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, and 2) adults are most motivated to learn when the subject has immediate impact and relevance on their lives.

Faith-based small groups are meant up to be lay-led and contextual. The following are some best practices for finding the right leaders for this ministry.

Ministry Coordinator

This role may be filled by a staff member, clergy, or a committed and experienced lay leader from the congregation.

Attributes of an Effective Ministry Coordinator

- Understands hospitality and knows how to create an inviting atmosphere
- Understands spiritual formation as an essential element of small groups
- Understands evangelism in small groups
- Serves as a good matchmaker (sorting members into small groups requires some intention, as we discuss later)
- Shows discretion
- Has connections and positive relationships across the congregation
- Possesses organizational and administrative skills
- Knows how to delegate and be a team player

Ministry Coordinator Tasks

- Create sign-up process (or work with church administrator to create this process)
- Develop calendar of small group seasons
- Ensure ministry is publicized and promoted
- Help to discern group membership rosters
- Provide training for Group Leaders
- Meet with Group Leaders regularly to check in
- Help discern formation content for groups
- Pray regularly for leaders and groups
- Organize evaluation and receive feedback from groups
- Work closely with church leadership on the ministry's mission and vision
- Help groups to discern outreach and evangelism opportunities

Group Leaders

The best training for small group facilitation is already having been part of a well-functioning small group. Ideally, think about people in your community who have taken part in Education for Ministry or other small groups. Remember: Good facilitation isn't about knowing all the content, but rather being able to facilitate meaningful conversation.

Attributes of an Effective Group Leader

- Has familiarity with the discussion material (“Let me rephrase the question...”)
- Invites others into the conversation (“Would anyone who hasn’t yet shared like to share?”)
- Is perceptive to nonverbal cues (“It seems like she’s trying to say something.”)
- Gets the conversation out of the head and into the heart: (“What does _____ have to do with your relationship with God?” or “How does it make you feel that...?”)
- Opens the conversation back up (“What do others think?”)
- Engages introverts (“Just a reminder: if you speak often, count to three before speaking. If you never speak, don’t stop to count!” or “We’re going to take a minute of silence to think about the question, and then we’ll share.”)
- Maintains group focus (“I wonder if anyone has thoughts about the topic at hand.”)
- Claims authority as facilitator (“I’m sorry, but we don’t interrupt one another. Not interrupting is part of our group’s norms.” or “Let’s remember to speak one at a time and wait for others to finish before we speak.”)
- Watches the time (“This is a great discussion, but we need to move on to the next topic [or end for the evening].”)
- Is open to sharing leadership with others in the group, as appropriate
- Practices good boundaries and discretion (Note: A church may want to encourage group leaders to complete the Safeguarding God’s People online training so they know the essentials of providing a safe space for all participants.)

Group Leader Tasks

- Pray for all members of the group
- Lead gatherings or help maintain a rota of which members will lead which gatherings
- Recruit a timekeeper or keep track of time throughout the meeting
- Host or coordinate the hosting of meetings
- Work with the Ministry Coordinator to determine formation, outreach, and evangelism strategies
- Help the group to remain connected between gatherings, through social media groups, email, or text threads

Group Co-Leaders

Group Co-Leaders assist the Group Leaders in an administrative and reflective role. Co-Leaders are important to the overall ministry strategy; they receive mentoring and leadership development from Group Leaders, ensuring they can serve as Group Leaders in the future.

Attributes of an Effective Group Co-Leader

- Has potential for conversational leadership
- Can serve as a team player in an assisting role to the Group Leader
- Participates as an engaged member and active observer of group dynamics
- Is willing to offer feedback and observations to the Group Leader
- Is willing to lead on logistics
- Is open to sharing leadership with others in the group, as appropriate
- Practices good boundaries and discretion (Note: A church may want to encourage group leaders to complete the Safeguarding God’s People online training so they know the essentials of providing a safe space for all participants.)

Group Co-Leader Tasks

- Pray for all members of the group
- Assist the Group Leader with conversational flow
- Organize and communicate with group members to coordinate food and hospitality
- Provide email or phone reminders to the group members
- Debrief each group gathering with the Group Leader to share observations and assess what is going well, what is not going well, and what may need to be shifted for future gatherings

Clergy

The clergy's role in relation to a small group ministry varies. However, there are a few things every clergyperson can do to support this ministry:

- Show public support for the small group ministry, the Ministry Coordinator, and the Group Leaders
- Commission small group leadership, ideally during worship
- Bless members of small groups as they start a new season, ideally during worship
- Assist with training the Group Leaders
- Advocate for or directly allocate resources so the ministry can thrive
- Become involved in a clergy small group

Note: People with small group experience differ about whether clergy could or should lead or otherwise engage in small groups in their own congregations. We recommend against it. Some lay group members may censor themselves, defer to the clergyperson, or wait for the clergyperson to speak. Likewise, the clergyperson may consciously or unconsciously slide into "expert mode." Ultimately, small group ministries are a wonderful opportunity to grow the leadership and spiritual authority of all God's people. If clergy are passionate about and experienced with small groups, they may consider the role of Ministry Coordinator or take up some of the suggestions above to be supportive and assist in other healthy ways.

PROCESS FOR FORMING GROUPS

Jesus was onto something: 12 is about the perfect upper-end number for a small group. You can get away with 8-14 people, though. Any fewer than eight, and with absences, the group is too small. Any more than 14, and there are too many people to have an in-depth single conversation. But beyond the number of participants, there are some additional steps that help in forming healthy groups.

How Will Members Join?

Member Sign-Up

In order to avoid an accidental popularity contest between hosts (something that happens when certain group leaders are better known than others), we suggest the following method. It allows members to sign up for the ministry, not for specific groups. Also, be prepared to make some phone calls to invite reluctant members to participate. Personal invitations go a long way to forming a meaningful small group. Be up front about the group's commitments when you invite people, so they know what to expect. Small groups function best with consistent participation, so be clear that you are depending on the members to participate consistently.

- Create a sign-up form that allows members to show their interest in being in an intentional small group.
- Then, have the leaders sort people into small groups, using both the information provided and their knowledge of members.

Here is an example of things you might ask on a sign-up sheet. Please note that this example assumes people are able to meet in-person in groups of about 12. **Sign-up forms should be modified to meet safety measures.**

Name:	Would you like to be in a multi-generational group? (includes children) Y/N
Email:	If no, will you need childcare? Y/N
Phone:	Do you have food or pet allergies? If so, please share:
Address:	Are you interested in hosting in your home? Y/N
	Which nights are best for you? (<i>mark all that apply</i>) <input type="checkbox"/> Sunday <input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday <input type="checkbox"/> Other

How to Sort Members into Groups

When assigning members to groups, there are a variety of things to consider.

- **Location:** Often, it is nice to have groups of folks who live in close proximity, as this fosters ease of meeting and familiarity of routine (they probably shop at similar stores, attend similar schools, etc.).
- **Demographics:** It is simple enough to sort groups by stages of life or age; however, we strongly recommend a mixture of ages and stages, whenever possible.
- **Rule of 2:** When sorting groups, pay careful attention that no one is alone in the group when it comes to demographics. For example, avoid placing one single person in a group of couples, or one retired person in a group of twentysomethings. Instead, at a minimum, make sure everyone has a buddy. Remember, we are attempting to remove aloneness, not create it.
- When there are multiple couples in a group, it can be better to have a larger group because 1) couples tend to be absent at the same time, and 2) some couples will have less to say because they often function as one unit.
- When appropriate, couples should feel free to join separate groups.

What Is the Timeline?

Calendar planning is vital to developing a small group ministry, and it is one of the main tasks of the Ministry Coordinator. It is important to form small groups with intentional time for considering content, reflecting, developing leadership, and inviting new people to join. Planning ahead with calendaring can help you think strategically about making small groups an integral part of your congregational life.

Your timeline should be determined before you begin to publicize and take sign-up forms. While depth of relationship can happen quickly in some groups, for others it can take time. For this reason, we suggest groups meet for a minimum of 6-9 sessions. After 9 sessions, groups could be given options to re-form or continue.

Will your group meet weekly, twice a month, or once a month? We recommend meeting weekly, if possible, when having 9 sessions or fewer (a little more than the length of a season in the liturgical calendar). Biweekly works best for groups that will meet for 12 sessions or longer – like 6 months, 9 months, or a year.

REMEMBER: A congregation may have multiple groups running at a time, with intensive, weekly groups meeting for a shorter term and others requiring a longer-term commitment.

It is important to communicate clearly with people about the timeline expectations when they join a small group. Having a clearly defined timeline will make your small group more appealing and accessible, as expectations will be set. It's a good idea to allow for breaks from small groups as well. During these breathing periods, leaders can regroup, reflection time can occur, changes can be implemented, marketing initiatives and invitations can be extended, and new leaders and groups can be formed.

Can New People Join?

This question is tied to the question about timeline. The challenge of whether to have closed small groups or open small groups (allowing for new people to join after the group has been started) is a tricky one. It is important to allow small groups to develop continuity and community; however, it also is important to allow new people to join small groups. One way to manage this balance is to have regular, set times for opening up small groups for people to join.

Option 1: Three 3-month small group cycles throughout the year

In this option, small groups would gather for three months, followed by one month off. This allows enough time for small groups to establish meaningful connections, for leaders to take breaks, and for marketing and invitation to happen for the new session of small groups. This also creates three attractive cycles of small groups over the course of a year. For example:

- Small groups meet January, February, and March; take April off; and use Easter as an opportunity to talk about small groups and invite visitors to consider joining one.
- Small groups meet May, June, and July; take August off; and use the ramp up to the school year and to fall to encourage people to join a small group.
- Small groups meet September, October, and November; take December off; and make intentional small group invitations at Christmas services.

Option 2: Longer-term small groups

In this option, small groups would operate for longer periods. This would allow for deeper connections among members, though it would limit the groups' accessibility to new people. If choosing this option, it may be good practice for some of the groups to be willing to welcome new people throughout the course of their session.

Even with a longer-term small group, it may be helpful to determine times for breaks, reevaluation and reflection, and new-member incorporation. The Group Leader should be sure to invite members to discuss whether they will continue or end as a break draws near (no later than the second to last session). It allows time to plan the following sessions or to say goodbye properly.

Where Will People Meet?

For a variety of reasons, we suggest meeting in homes whenever possible. This allows for a more informal tone and helps to facilitate head-to-heart connections. Additional options include over a digital platform such as Zoom, outdoors at a park, at a coffee shop, or on church property.

A word on digital gatherings: It is surprising how much spiritual intimacy groups report when gathering on a platform like Zoom, especially in the current period of physical distancing. It's where we meet with therapists and worship God. Here are some suggestions on how to maximize the connection and break through the digital barrier:

- Invite group members to wear comfortable clothes, dressing more for going to a picnic rather than to a board meeting or even to church.
- Encourage members to bring beverages and snacks to the meeting or even to share a meal, just as you would if you were meeting in a home.
- Add more time around the beginning and end of the meeting for checking in with each other. Host "show and tell" moments to help members get to know each other's worlds better.
- Tactile activity helps! Let members know they are free to bring along knitting or crochet projects, coloring books, or other art projects, as well as pets.

Kids

Kids can be a gift to a small group, but the group needs to determine together what is the best fit. Options we have seen work include:

- Provide childcare at the church, especially if multiple small groups are meeting on the same night.
- Include children in the small group, tailoring the formation time to include questions and activities they will understand and enjoy.
- Pitch in as a group to hire an on-site small group babysitter. This way, kids can be involved during the meals and prayers, but then have their own activity elsewhere during the discussion.
- Pitch in as a group to hire an off-site small group babysitter.

Sharing Meals

After all, the gospel is a story of meals, opening in the garden and ending at a feast.

—Kendall Vanderslice

Breaking bread together – be it tacos or a French loaf – has been part of gathering in small groups for as long as small groups have been around. Sharing a meal connects us intimately with how the church – and all of humanity – gathers across time and space, across divisions and inequities. Here are some suggestions for how to handle meals. Like most of these decisions, it will be highly contextual.

- **Potluck!** Each gathering can be a potluck with the theme set by either the host or a rotation of group members. This also works for Zoom/web gatherings.
- **Cook together:** Members could bring the ingredients and then prepare and share the meal together. Checking in can happen during the preparation, with the formation portion of the gathering during the meal.
- **Order in:** Group members give what they can and – with the funds collected – the host can order pizza or other delivery.
- **Desserts or snacks only:** A simpler option of desserts or snacks only works IF the group forms a plan together, everyone shares the task in some way, and no one comes expecting a full meal.

Commitment

In order to create a meaningful experience, members should be asked to commit to making the group a priority for the duration, recognizing that their participation will greatly impact both their life and the lives of the other group members.

Be up front about expectations in communications – written and personal – so people are prepared. Small groups function best with consistent participation, so be clear that you are depending on the members to participate consistently. This can be part of the group norms or covenant.

Marks of an Effective Small Group

Reflecting on how well your small group is coalescing is a helpful exercise. If your small group is moving toward these three habits, then you're on the right track:

- Prayer is practiced as a small group and individually.
- The Good News is shared, whether in scripture or personal storytelling.
- There is engagement from each member of the small group. Ask yourself: Is everyone's voice in the room?

As a small group comes to an end (or at a predetermined length of time for longer-term groups), it is a good idea to allow time for constructive feedback through a reflective discussion about process, or through a parish-wide survey. Don't be afraid to make the corrections necessary to foster truly relational and meaningful small groups.

PART 3: GATHERINGS

BUILDING GROUP NORMS

Why Do We Need Norms?

Setting group norms helps everyone in the group to start from the same place of understanding and respect. When we take the time to share guidelines that help us communicate with intention and mutuality, rooting our group in the love of Jesus, we are better able to move from our heads into our hearts, growing relationally and spiritually.

Norms also help the group to hold one another accountable without shame or personalizing. If a group has established and together agreed on expectations about being on time or listening to each other, it's much easier to invite a member who shows up late or takes up lots of conversational space to return to the norms (more on this later).

When to Set Norms

The first time your group meets, the Group Leader should help the group to set norms together. Group norms are simply expectations about how members of the group will treat each other, and they are an important part of any healthy group. Some groups prefer to post norms clearly in their meeting space or in the chat box if online. Others reread the norms each week as they begin their time together. Other groups are much more informal. However, it's important for everyone to have the same expectations about their time together.

Issues to Consider

Here are some issues that all groups should discuss as they begin their relational small group.

- **Confidentiality:** What is allowed to be shared outside the group? What may be shared on social media?
- **Respect:** How will group members respect each other during their conversations?
- **Logistics:** What are expectations about arriving on time? About providing or sharing food? About consuming alcohol during a gathering? Do members of the group have food restrictions?
- **Technology:** What is the phone policy? Will phones be turned off? Placed in the middle of the table? Or is casual use acceptable?
- **Session preparation:** What, if anything, are group members supposed to do to prepare before meeting each week?

This set of Respectful Communication Guidelines from the Kaleidoscope Institute is a good place to begin when crafting norms as a group:

- R - take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others.
- E - use EMPATHETIC listening.
- S - be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles.
- P - PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak.
- E - EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions.
- C - keep CONFIDENTIALITY.
- T - TRUST ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

Facilitators should feel empowered to reference the group's norms if a behavior is becoming a distraction. "I'm sorry, but the group decided that we would not be texting during the session. Is this an emergency?" or "Remember, it's our policy not to interrupt others while they are talking. Please wait for her to finish." If the group or one particular member consistently breaks the norms, the facilitator may find it helpful to revisit the norms with the group. The group may decide to keep or change the norms.

Sample Session Structure

Here is a tried-and-true structure for a small group gathering that is rooted in creating space for transformation, belonging, and liberation through Christ to flourish.

Meal (30 minutes)

If you'll be eating together, allow 30 minutes for the meal and then start your session after everyone is finished eating. If you are cooking together, this time might be adjusted some.

Prayer (5 minutes)

Ask God to be with your group during your time together.

Check-In (15 minutes)

Check-in is a chance for group members to get to know each other better, reconnect, and warm up for the discussion questions.

Some tips for check-in:

- The first few times your group meets, consider asking an "ice-breaker" question.
- Your group may use Mutual Invitation, a process that encourages shared leadership. The first speaker invites the next person to speak. Participants may "pass," but the facilitator should invite those who do pass to speak at the end. More details about the process are below.
- Check-in may take longer than 15 minutes the first few times your group meets, but it's worth taking the extra time to get to know each other better.
- Check-in is not about responding to the last person who talked. Each person offers his/her/ their own personal response.
- Try to link the check-in question to the focus content.

Curricula often provide sample check-in questions for each week, but feel free to meet the context of your own group and make your own!

A note on Mutual Invitation (this process description adapted from *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb* by Eric H. F. Law): The process of Mutual Invitation is a method of sharing that ensures everyone who wants to speak has the opportunity to do so. It also has the benefit of building group cohesion. Members are required to call on one another by name and may be required to recognize and speak directly with members they might not naturally connect to. Lastly, Mutual Invitation shifts power within a group and honors different cultural expectations about speaking. In some cultures, group members will not speak up unless invited.

The process is as follows: A designated person will share first. When that person has finished speaking, that person invites another by name to share. The person you invite to speak next does not need to be the person next to you! After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you are not ready to share yet, say “I pass for now” and you will be invited to share later. If you don’t want to say anything at all, simply say “pass” and proceed to invite another to share. The group does this until everyone has been invited.

Scripture and Wisdom (45-60 minutes)

No matter the topic or content, the small group should engage scripture as part of the gathering. Other content – like a book or a curriculum – can, of course, be incredibly meaningful, but regular engagement with scripture helps the group to “break life open over the word of God.” You get to know the story of God and discover where it intersects with your own. In the process, you learn a lot about each other and can have truly life-giving, faithful conversation.

There are wonderful and simple processes you might consider, all of which highlight listening to God and each other, and none of which requires extra study or Bible expertise. The book *Cultivating the Missional Church* (Church Publishing) includes a free downloadable resource that describes a few popular options, including *Dwelling in the Word*, *African Bible Study*, and *Gospel-Based Discipleship*. Find it here: https://www.churchpublishing.org/siteassets/pdf/cultivating-the-missional-church/cultivating_missional_church_study_guide.pdf. Group Leaders or Ministry Coordinators should feel free to adapt whatever scripture conversation resource they choose in order to fit the time and needs of the group. More curricula and tools are listed in the Resources section of this document.

If your group is also engaging additional content (“Wisdom”), you should make sure there’s adequate time for engaging that material after your scripture time.

Regardless of the content – either scripture alone or scripture plus some other source of wisdom – remember that the purpose of a small group is relationship with others and with God. The group may seek the safety of gathering information, but the Group Leader and Co-Leader are responsible for helping people to swim out to deeper waters.

Effective small groups include open, creative, and life-giving conversation. Staying focused on the topic, group members can together ask questions that encourage emotional connection, real sharing, and creative thinking, in addition to engagement with the material. Good discussion questions generate a space where people actually get to talk about what matters to them most.

Regardless of the topic, a good discussion question...

- Is easily understood by participants
- Could be imaginative (“I wonder...”) or more serious (“What does it mean for your life that...?”)
- Links the participant’s life experience to the content
- Is open-ended (e.g., “What is intriguing about this idea?”) instead of closed (e.g., “Do you like this idea?”) and uses the classic reporter prompts of who, what, when, where, and – best of all – why and how
- Avoids questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”
- Encourages storytelling
- Brings God and faith into the conversation
- Uses the content to help participants think deeply about what matters to them and to the world

Be prepared with at least five discussion questions, but know that the group might go really deep into just one and not get to the others. That’s OK! The point of this time is life-giving conversation, so if that’s happening, there’s no need to shut down conversation to get through all of them.

Sometimes, the Group Leader or Co-Leader will have to ask some follow-up questions to keep the conversation going. Helpful follow-up questions:

- How did that make you feel?
- Tell us more about that.
- What made you think of that?

While you’ve just read a host of possible questions, you should feel empowered to ask your own questions. This is your small group!

Follow-Through (10-15 minutes)

Follow-through time is a chance for the group to discern and name what’s been learned, assess group cohesion and dynamics, or name what could be different next time.

Two essential questions help with this process, especially the shared learning and discernment:

- What is God saying to you (or us) right now?
- What are you (or we) going to do about it?

Sharing answers to these two questions as a group not only provides a space for group discernment (as in, “Is this really what God is saying to me and to us?”), but it also helps people to shift toward action and accountability and gives members a sense of intention.

Bonus: The check-in at the next gathering could invite group members to share about how they applied the last session’s wisdom. This cycle of listening, discerning, following, and accountability grows us in relation to God and each other.

There are a variety of questions that help the group to assess their time together, but here are some samples:

- Where/when did you feel close to God? Where/when did you feel far away from God?
- Where/when did you meet Jesus in your session today?
- Where/when did you see light from the Holy Spirit?
- What did you notice about our time together?
- At what point did the group have a lot of energy? At what point was the energy lacking?
- What will you take away from our conversation tonight?
- (If short on time!) Describe our time together in one word.

Worship (10 minutes)

Never skip worship! Taking time to worship God brings the group together in a special way. You may be tempted to extend discussion and cut out worship, but that's why you need a timekeeper, a good Group Leader and Co-Leader, and group norms. Together, you can ensure you respect the clock and make time for worship that isn't rushed. As your group prays with each other each week, you'll begin to see relationships transform.

Ideas for Worship:

- Pray Compline in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 127) or Night Prayer in A New Zealand Prayer Book (p. 167).
- Sing simple hymns or Taizé chants together.
- Pray your own Prayers of the People. If you need a primer, check out page 383 of the Book of Common Prayer.
- Practice Lectio Divina on a pertinent passage of scripture.
- Offer prayers for the person sitting next to you.
- Be with each other and God in silence.
- Host an Agape Meal.

Whatever you do, be joyful! Worship doesn't need to be serious, formal, or led by professionals; you only need open hearts and full participation. Use your imagination and the strengths of your group to make the worship experience your own. Some groups choose to invite different members to lead worship each week, or to designate a worship leader who is not the Group Leader.

Closing (5-10 minutes)

Note: This portion can be folded into your Worship time if it is at the close of the gathering.

Set intention: Going around the circle, members should take a few moments to set an intention for the time between meetings. To set an intention, name a guiding principle for how you want to be, live, and show up in the world as God's beloved until your next meeting. Among other ideas, intentions can include incorporating new spiritual practices, habits, or attitudes.

Pray for your small group: The Group Leader and group members should pray for each person in the group by name. Simple prayers such as "We ask your blessing on ____ this week" or "We give thanks for ____" will go a long way to creating a spirit of love and unity within the group.

FAQS

Note: Feel free to use this portion of the document in church communications. Often by publishing these questions and answers in a church-wide forum, you can help ease concerns and reluctance. You can also find these questions addressed in the video (that you are also free to share) found here: <https://iam.ec/smallgroups>.

So, what is an intentional small group?

An intentional small group is a gathering of people, usually 8-12, who come together around a faith practice, set of practices, or content and commit to building transformative relationships during their time together. They can meet weekly or monthly, in churches, homes, or out in the community. They can be intergenerational or focused on people in a common stage of life. Most importantly, they consist of people who care for each other's spiritual development. Small group experiences might already be built into your spiritual life if you're part of ministries like Education for Ministry, Servant Leadership, Daughters of the King, a Brotherhood of St. Andrew chapter, a Bible study group, or the Vestry. Not every group within every church is an intentional small group, but with a little planning and a lot of intentionality, all groups can be.

Why do some small groups meet in homes?

Small groups that meet in homes are often called "home groups." Hosting the group in a member's home can offer a more personal and relaxed environment for its members, who may gather around a shared meal. This model is inspired by the gatherings of the early church as mentioned in Acts 2:46: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

Do small groups replace Sunday morning worship?

Absolutely not. Just as early followers of Jesus attended temple worship and then met in homes, small groups enhance worship by building deeper relationships between parishioners. When you're part of a small group and also attend congregational worship, you might feel that, instead of sitting next to (or looking on-screen at) people you know only casually, you are interacting with people who feel like spiritual family. Many small group members attend Sunday morning more often. They feel accountable to others and look forward to sharing with people they now care about. Intentional small groups help create a sense of belonging – something we all long for.

My congregation is resistant to small groups. Some people say it's not something Episcopalians "do." How could I help to break through that fear?

Small groups are essential to Christian life. They're not just for some church folks – they're for all of us. They are the ideal space for growing faith and building healthy and faithful relationship, personal prayer, spiritual direction, and fellowship. Many Episcopalians don't know it, but the term "small group movement" goes back to the 1920s and 1930s, when

Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City “utilized several principles central to the eventual proliferation of the small group movement in the church” (research from Frank Lincoln Fowler III).

Episcopal traditions can be woven throughout small group gatherings. Use the Book of Common Prayer or Enriching Our Worship for worship, use the lectionary to choose the scripture to engage, align the topic with seasons in the Liturgical Calendar, or choose spiritual writings from “Anglican Divines” – you’ll find their inspiring stories in *A Great Cloud of Witnesses* or Richard Schmidt’s *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality*.

Why does it matter for my life?

Part of living the Way of Love is to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, both of which are an essential part of any healthy intentional small group. Following the model of Jesus himself, all Christians should be living out their faith as individuals, as members of local churches, and within intentional small group communities. We believe that when we take the time to establish and attend intentional small groups, we are better able to grow as the Jesus Movement: a community of people who follow the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus – a way that has the power to change each of our lives and to change this world.

How can we begin an intentional small group ministry?

There are many ways to begin an intentional small group ministry in your church.

1. Consider what groups already exist in your church: Vestry? Choir? Altar Guild? Could those groups begin pursuing transformative relationships and incorporating Jesus-centered practices into their gatherings, using resources tailored to the group’s mission? It’s worth considering.
2. Use the tips and teachings found in *Living the Way of Love in Community: A 9-Session Small Group Study*. The curriculum – based on the Way of Love’s practices of turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, and rest – includes more than just the nine session guides; it also includes wonderful instructions on how to structure and launch an intentional small group.

What’s the difference between a small group; a house church; and groups that meet for support, tasks, or social gathering?

Many people wonder about house churches, especially in a time when church buildings are difficult to access. House churches are primarily focused on worship, but within a home instead of a traditional church building. They are small communities and are led by laity and clergy, depending on need and structure. Often, a house church will also have a strong discipleship component and may share many of the practices and structures of a small group, due to the intimacy of the gathering. For more information house churches, please see <https://episcopalchurch.org/new-episcopal-communities>.

As for the other group types, here is a list of groups drawn from Arlin Rothauge’s guide, “Making Small Groups Effective.” While this packet focuses on the first type name in the following list (discipleship-oriented groups), it may help to know other types. Note: The other types can be transformed into small groups or discipleship groups that grow faith!

- **[Intentional] Discipleship-oriented groups:** The central focus is on the spiritual and personal relationships among the members. The format and content of meetings will vary. Emphasis is placed on self-discovery, the dynamics of relationships, and the processes necessary to promote spiritual maturity and ministry. Terms such as “growth group,” “caring group,” or “covenant group” are often used to describe this type of group orientation. (Additionally, these can also be called life groups, home groups, cell groups, and of course small groups. The term is dependent on the congregation’s preference, but the concept remains the same.)
- **Content-oriented groups:** The main reason for meeting is to study a biblical passage or some topic of mutual relevance. Little if any time is spent dealing with group dynamics. The primary focus is on content.
- **Support-oriented groups:** Sometimes called support groups or recovery groups, the members meet together for common encouragement and understanding.
- **Task-oriented groups:** These are “doing” groups. The primary thrust is to accomplish a defined task, job, or assignment, which the members do together. Most committees and planning groups fit into this category.
- **Socially-oriented groups:** The participants assemble to get better acquainted and have fun together. These are also called “Foyers” or “Dinner for 8” groups.

Should clergy be present in a church-sponsored small group, especially if there is worship?

As long as worship does not include Eucharist, you do not need to have a clergy person present. We recommend that, when possible, all small groups are lay-led and clergy only attend a group in which they can truly be equals with the members, and not deferred to as the spiritual authority in the group.

RESOURCES

RESOURCES RELATED TO ESTABLISHING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Kaleidoscope Respectful Communication Guidelines – PDF

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c3631609772ae2563852818/t/5d2780613d10f200016344d8/1562869859015/KI+Toolbox+-+English+PDF.pdf>

“Making Small Groups Effective” by Arlin J. Rothauge, Ph.D. – PDF

https://episcopalchurch.org/files/CDR_series4%281%29.pdf

Episcopal Small Group FAQ Video

<https://episcopalchurch.wistia.com/medias/4o10q3oejc>

“Keeping Congregations Connected: Online Fellowship and Small Groups” from The FaithX Project – article

https://faithx.net/keeping-congregations-connected-online-fellowship-and-small-groups/?utm_term=0_292215115e-a73c02744f-127165677

Intentional Small Group Resources – webpage

<https://episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/intentional-small-group-resources>

Small Groups that Work Course from ChurchNext – e-course

<https://www.churchnext.tv/library/small-groups-that-work/about/>

Fresh Expressions USA – website

<https://freshexpressionsus.org/>

“Small Groups, Big Impact” by John Adler – article

<https://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/433/small-groups-big-impact>

3DMovements – website

<https://www.3dmovements.com/>

RESOURCES RELATED TO CONTENT FOR SMALL GROUP FORMATION

Living the Way of Love in Community from The Episcopal Church – curricula/PDF

<https://episcopalchurch.org/library/document/living-way-love-community-small-group-curriculum>

Transforming Questions downloadable course by Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe, from Forward Movement – books and free downloads

<https://www.forwardmovement.org/Products/2394/transforming-questions-brdownloadable-course.aspx>

Second Breath Center, Resources for Worship Practices and Faith Formation – website

<https://secondbreathcenter.com/about/>

Revive Small Group Discipleship Course from Forward Movement – curricula

<https://www.forwardmovement.org/Products/2497/revive--smallgroup-discipleship-program.aspx>

Society of Saint John the Evangelist, multiple small group curricula – website

<https://www.ssje.org/>

Cultivating the Missional Church (Church Publishing) includes a free downloadable resource that describes a few popular options, including Dwelling in the Word, African Bible Study, and Gospel-Based Discipleship

https://www.churchpublishing.org/siteassets/pdf/cultivating-the-missional-church/cultivating_missional_church_study_guide.pdf

The Class Meeting by Kevin Watson – curricula

https://my.seedbed.com/product/class-meeting-by-kevin-watson/?_fs=614ae3de-5b87-413a-b145-2067ab2d6c0f

For more information on Building an Intentional Small Group, visit iam.ec/smallgroups or email wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org.