

YOUNG ADULT
SMALL GROUPS

A GUIDE FOR
COORDINATORS



YOUTH, YOUNG ADULT,
& CAMPUS MINISTRIES
DIOCESE OF DALLAS

small christian communities

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A Timeless Model:

Introduction to Small Groups

WHY THIS GUIDE?

This guide is produced by the Office of Youth, Young Adult, and Campus Ministries (OYYACM) of the Diocese of Dallas. OYYACM exists, in part, to support young adults in the diocese by aiding those who serve young adults. From our conversations with young adult ministers throughout Dallas, it is evident that many parishes wish to offer community building opportunities through small groups within the young adult population, while also providing Catholic formation and opportunities to grow in relationship with Jesus. Small groups are already thriving in several of our parishes.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is intended to serve as a resource for young adults seeking to coordinate a small group in order to grow in relationship with Jesus alongside their peers. Parish and ministry leaders may also use this guide to encourage young adults to coordinate and participate in small groups.

It is our belief that any faithful individual can start a small group. A coordinator doesn't need to hold a paid position at a church or a degree in theology. Nor do they need to organize the small group through a parish or ministry. However, a small group coordinator ought to emphasize the importance of parish community and regular Sunday Mass attendance (alongside small group participation).

WHY SMALL GROUPS?

Small groups are a timeless model. Jesus mentored a small group of disciples during his missionary time on earth (Mark 3:13-19). Small groups of Christians constituted the original structure of the Christian people after Pentecost (ref. Paul's New Testament epistles to various communities). Small groups have been essential to parish and ministry life throughout the duration of the Catholic Church.

Today, small groups continue to be found in vibrant faith communities varying in size, setting, purpose, structure, and duration. For example, many classroom teachers, or catechists, utilize small groups to separate their students into collaborative learning teams. Retreat directors also

utilize small groups for the period of a weekend to allow retreatants to process experiences in a more intimate and trusting setting. Small groups, specifically structured to allow for a mentor-mentee dynamic, have also been fundamental in discipling college campuses.

SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This guide is intended for a particular type of small group that is most akin to a peer group or small Christian community. This type of small group can be described as a gathering of friends, who, during their gathering, take time for prayer, fellowship, and growth in relationship with Jesus (Acts 2:42).

AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE

In an effort to avoid creating an easily-outdated document, we are intentionally refraining from creating a "plug and play" small group curriculum that could be picked off a shelf and implemented step by step. We believe true small group coordination is more of an art, and less of a science. As the coordinator learns and gains experience in the role, so will the development of his or her style of coordinating and caring for its members. Furthermore, we are under no illusion that we are capable of endorsing one particular model or method of small groups that is universally applicable. We hope to propose considerations for local leadership.



The Practical Coordination of Small Groups

BEFORE STARTING

Outlined below are some considerations you will have to make before you begin your small group. You may toggle between these considerations as you plan. The planning process is very seldom linear.

PURPOSE

Small groups are intended to help peers grow in their relationship with Jesus. This purpose must frame all decisions made surrounding the small group and be clearly communicated to its members.

Beyond the general intention of the group, you may wish to identify additional purposes: to learn more about praying with Scripture, to intercede for an ill family member, to support one another in maintaining faith while in a corporate environment, etc.

Clearly defining the purpose of your small group will help you determine the structure of your group, the content you select for prayer or formation, and the individuals you invite to join.

PRAYER

At all times, the small group coordinator ought to yield to the direction of the Holy Spirit by constantly turning to prayer for guidance when planning the small groups.

Throughout the duration of the small group, there should be an intentional effort by the coordinator to intercede for its members, prayerfully discern the direction of the small group (Isa 30:21), and keep one's relationship with Jesus as the primary priority.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

We recommend there be one small group coordinator for each small group. The small group coordinator is welcome to delegate tasks to other members, but is ultimately responsible for ensuring that foundations are established for success and fruitfulness in the small group.

If this small group exists within a parish or ministry structure, the small group leader must cooperate and respect the order of management within that structure. There may already be processes and protocols to which the small groups must adhere for communication, requesting permission to meet, advertisement of gatherings, etc.

COORDINATOR RESPONSIBILITIES

- Define the Purpose of the Group
- Determine the Meeting Dates, Time, Location, and Duration
- Determine the Small Group Meeting Structure
- Provide Content for Small Group
- Manage Communication to Group and to Parish/Ministry Leadership
- Invite Attendees to Small Group
- Host the Meetings
- Facilitate the Meetings
- Communicate and Maintain Small Group Expectations
- Communicate Small Group Spiritual Foundations

DELEGATION OF ROLES

Host:

- Provide a hospitable environment
- Coordinate or provide for beverages/snacks/meals during the meeting

Communication:

- Organize a roster of members
- Send meeting information and reminders to group members

Facilitator:

- Ensure the meeting runs on schedule
- Lead prayer, content, and discussion

Co-Facilitator:

- Works with facilitator to manage small group discussion and facilitate fruitful and balanced conversation
- Lead prayer, small group content, and discussion when facilitator is unavailable to do so

FORMING THE GROUP

AUDIENCE AND SIZE

By audience, we are referring to what “type” of people you wish to have in your small group, particularly in terms of life stage and spirituality. Identifying an audience will help you determine the location, time, frequency, and duration of your small group. It will also help you determine what sort of content and prayer is most appropriate for your audience based on their familiarity and comfortability with the faith and spirituality.

The size of the small group is up to you but, remember, it is a small group. Too many individuals will hinder the ability to form close relationships and to adequately share during discussion time. It is ideal to have no more than 8 individuals.

TIME, FREQUENCY, DURATION

Your purpose and audience will help determine the time, duration, and frequency of your small group.

As far as timing goes, you need enough time to accomplish what you wish to do without feeling rushed. However, if the span of time your small group meets is too long or goes too late at night, it will seem exhausting and burdensome.

In considering the duration of the lifetime for your group, you may decide that you wish to meet indefinitely or you may wish to set a definitive end date. Whatever you decide, consider how the duration may

impact a person's desire to join the small group and their commitment level while they are involved. Also, please know that it is okay for small groups to end and for participants to seek growth elsewhere. This does not mean that the small group has failed.

STRUCTURE

Determining the structure requires the “artistic” skill of coordinating a small group. When determining the structure, consider the following.

Brainstorm what activities will help accomplish your goal. Here is a 4-part structure that you may wish to utilize:

- **Hospitality:** Snacks and drinks? A full meal? Coffee and tea?
- **Fellowship** (getting to know one another): Conversation over a meal? Structured game? Question prompt?
- **Formation Content & Discussion:** Scripture? Video Series? Book? Organic sharing?
- **Prayer:** Spontaneous? Scripture? Praise or sacred music? A Rosary, Divine Mercy Chaplet, or Liturgy of the Hours?

Develop interpersonal dynamics.

You need to be “person savvy” when creating your schedule flow. You want the gathering to seem natural and lend itself to the formation of organic relationships.

Build in time for flexibility.

Dinner may take a little longer one night; traffic may be extra heavy; someone may be particularly verbose in discussion. En-

able yourself to be flexible by scheduling in some free time in your gathering that you could use for another activity if needed.

Caution: As time goes on, there is a tendency for hospitality and fellowship time to encroach upon formation and prayer time. Care must be taken to keep these in balance.

LOCATION

It is not necessary for small groups to meet at parishes or ministry sites. In fact, it is often more comfortable and organic to meet in homes. When choosing your location:

- Think ahead to those you may invite and consider the travel/ traffic they may face in order to reach the space.
- Consider the difficulty of finding the space: multiple access codes for apartment complexes, shortage of parking, etc.
- Ensure you have a space where everyone can fit comfortably.
- Ensure you have a space conducive to conversation and any other activities you will have, such as meals.
- Ensure you have permission to meet in the space you have chosen. This means contacting the correct individual at a parish or ministry, or communicating with family members and roommates if in a home. If there are pets in the home, consider further distractions and allergies.

INVITATIONS

Open Invite

An open invite would be most appropriate if you were organizing small groups through a parish or ministry and wanted to extend an opportunity for community to those searching for it. Invitations are always going to be more effective when made in person.

- Determine how you are going to advertise the small groups: Mass announcement, bulletin, social media post, email campaign, word of mouth, etc.
- Determine how people are going to sign up for your small group: Turn in a paper form, online form, contact a particular individual, etc.

Closed Invite

A closed invite would be most appropriate when you either have a very specific purpose or you simply wish to organize a small group for your friends.

- Pray about a list of those you wish to invite.
- Communicate the invite as well as an RSVP deadline.

RUNNING THE GROUP: SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS

It is recommended that the following Spiritual Foundations are read aloud to the group at the first gathering. A simplified version of the statement may be read at every meeting. The Spiritual Foundations are the values that, when upheld within a small group community, allow the opportunity for the group to be successful. It is important that everyone is working together to uphold these values.

INTIMACY

Christians believe in a triune God who desires to have a personal relationship with each of us (1 Jn 3:1). That is the ultimate spiritual foundation of small groups. We believe we have a God that wants to grow in intimacy with us, a God who knows and loves us (Isa 43:1), and whom we can know and love in return. We believe God can speak to us in many ways, especially through the loving words and actions of a Christian community. This is our primary reason for gathering in small groups.

COMMUNITY

We need each other in the spiritual life. God didn't reveal Himself to us in isolation. He reveals Himself to us through His Body, the Church. And just like a body has many parts which all must work together to function properly, we also depend upon others to know and respond to Christ and His Gospel (1 Cor 12:12-26). We find developing deep friendships centered on Christ with other committed Christians to be indispensable to reaching our full potential in relationship with God.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality refers to both the environmental elements that lead to comfort and the dispositions of hearts to embrace one another. People long to be welcomed. A warm reception will open newcomers to the group and make them more comfortable to share. Small groups, then, are to be emphatically welcoming (1 Pt 4:9-10). At times, groups run the risk of getting too comfortable, cliquish, and even closing in on themselves. Everyone should feel welcomed and loved since we are called to love everyone and to embrace the stranger (Mt 25:35).

RUNNING THE GROUP: LOGISTICS

ENVIRONMENT

The environment is essential to setting the tone of your small group, but remember, your personal hospitality will be most important.

Through your environment, you want to communicate that you were expecting your guests. You can do this by thinking ahead and being prepared: setting up extra chairs, having snacks and water available, generally tidying up the area you will be in.

Consider how elements such as the temperature of your space, the lighting, and the comfort of the chairs will contribute to the fruitfulness of your small group.

When guests are first becoming accustomed to the space, make sure you orient them to the restrooms and where they can get water/ snacks.

MEALS

You may or may not have a meal as part of your small group time, but you do want to ensure that no attendees are hungry. You may organize a meal or snacks in a variety of ways:

- If you are rotating locations, the host can be responsible for the meal.
- You may have a potluck every time you gather.
- You may order out.

- If cooking, you may opt to collect money from participants to offset costs.

Be sure that you know if any of your group members have allergies and you communicate to the others to avoid bringing allergens to the small group.

CONTENT

The content of your small group formation will depend on the purpose and audience of your small group. We will not recommend specific content in this document, but are available for consultation if you would like recommendations of avenues to search for content.

When choosing content:

- It is safer to stick with publishers you know who have a reputation for producing orthodox and engaging material. Look for an imprimatur, which is an official license of the Catholic Church, noting that the material is in good standing.
- Often, books and video series intended for discussion come with small group questions.
- Scripture should always have a primary place in your content options!
- If the content must be purchased, inquire with your parish or ministry as to whether or not there are available funds.

COMMUNICATION

Invitation

Your initial communication with attendees will be the invitation. Your invitation

should include the following:

- Name of the Small group (if there is one)
- Purpose of the Group
- Location
- Time, Duration, and Frequency
- Expectation of Commitment (Do they need to make a certain number of the meeting dates?)
- Whether or not a meal will be provided
- Any cost associated
- When you need an RSVP
- If RSVP yes, note:
 - Whether or not you can share the member's email/cell with other group members
 - Any payment and timeframe of payment
 - Whether or not the members need to bring any materials to small group
 - Whether or not the the member has any allergies

Before First Meeting

Determine mode of communication.

Some groups may prefer email and some may prefer text. Because of the amount of content that needs to go in the “before first meeting” communication, we recommend email at least initially.

- Thank you for joining!
- Reminder of meeting time, location, dates
- Other small group members' names
- Locations/parking instructions
- What to bring
- General flow of the small group (no need to provide a detailed schedule)

- Let them know you are praying for them

Throughout Duration of Small Groups

- Continue to send periodic communications (weekly, if the group meets that frequently).
- Include any weekly challenges or homework, change of location.
- It's always nice to add encouragement for the group based on your previous discussions.
- Feel free to plan additional gatherings or share events happening outside of small group that may be of interest. However, be careful not to spam with too much communication.

After Conclusion of the Series

- A big thank you to all attendees and those who were involved with leadership/ hosting
- An encouragement to continue growing in relationship with God and one another
- Request for feedback on the experience
- Survey on whether or not gathering as a small group in the future is of interest

Electronic Communication Tips

- Avoid conflict
- Avoid long messages
- Avoid complex/controversial topics
- Avoid risky sarcasm and humor
- Avoid any personal information about the members on social media

RUNNING THE GROUP: EXPECTATIONS

It is recommended that expectations are read aloud to the group at the first gathering, and as needed in further gatherings. Expectations are essential in building the culture of the small group. A clear presentation of expectations will best ensure that everyone is on the same page about the purpose of the group, the investment required to build community, and how the community is to function together. You may wish to allow members to add or discuss expectations.

Your goal in presenting expectations is to create buy in for these practices that will allow your small group to be successful. Recognize that individuals may feel resistant to some of the practices, so your presentation ought to be presented gently without a controlling tone.

COMMITMENT

The commitment required for small group participation should be communicated along with the invitation to join and reinforced at the first gathering. As coordinator, stress that this small group should be a priority to group members when they are managing their calendars. You may also choose to define a particular number of small groups that you hope for members to attend. It may be helpful to establish how individuals are to let you know if they will be missing a meeting. If the small group looks completely different every week because certain people do or do not show up, it will take a longer time to develop trust.

Attendance is not the only element of commitment. One can be present, physically, without completely investing otherwise. Spend time allowing small group members to articulate what it means to be committed to one another and to “journey through life” together.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is key to creating authentic friendships with those who desire your ultimate good. It means, to some degree, being transparent in your walk with Christ before these friends and allowing them to encourage you in the spiritual life, and the other way around. Accountability can involve handling conflict within the group (Mt 18:15-17), exhorting one another to live a moral lifestyle (Lk 17:3), praying for one another (Jm 5:16), and encouraging one another in virtue (Pro 27:17).

AUTHENTICITY

In any true friendship, the individuals must be willing to “show up as they are”. God loves each person in the small group (Jn 3:16). In order to grow closer with Him and the others present, each individual needs to be honest and vulnerable about their relationship with God- their struggles, their joys, their questions, their fervor. Small groups are a place to respect each individual’s journey and accept them as they are. Small groups are not a place to hide, to pretend, to be overly concerned with other’s perceptions of oneself (Gal 1:10). It is a safe space where everyone is respected.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your parish or ministry may have specific protocol for when it comes to handling matters of confidentiality. Please seek to find this information before beginning your small group. To respect each member’s effort to be authentic, confidentiality is essential. It is helpful to remind participants that no personal information shared within the trust of the small group is to be shared outside of the small group. If there are any major concerns with the well-being or safety of an individual, consider the steps below.

- Set up a time when you can speak with the individual in private. If the individual seems to be in immediate danger, have this conversation happen immediately.
- Explain to the individual why you wish to talk privately and open with a prayer for guidance, support, and healing.

- Ask the individual to elaborate upon what they shared in small group. Listen attentively and with care.
- Determine whether or not the individual is in immediate danger.
- Involve a third party as seems necessary. It might be best not to handle this on your own, but with another member present.
- The parish or ministry contact
- A member of the individual’s family
- Another small group member, for the sake of counsel
- The services of a counselor
- The guidance of a priest
- The police- if you believe the person is in immediate danger.
- Make a game plan with the person.
- Close in prayer.

TIMELINESS

Small groups should begin and end at the communicated time to be respectful to the individuals involved. This means there needs to be a concerted effort from the attendees to arrive on time, an intention of the coordinator or facilitator to move the small group along on schedule, and an awareness of guests to make sure they don’t overstay their welcome after the conclusion of small group.

PARTICIPATION

Many personalities will compose the dynamics of your small group. There are a few expectations that pertain specifically to discussion.

- Extroverts and introverts need to be able to share equally in small group.

This requires everyone to be aware of the other members in the group to make sure that they are neither monopolizing the conversation nor neglecting to add to it.

- Individuals may add to a person's comment, but be sure not to volley back and forth with only one other person, inhibiting anyone else from contributing to the conversation.
- This is not a place for advising or being directive.
- Speak in "I" statements. Instead of "we live in a materialistic culture and we struggle with the pressures from social media", say "I struggle with the pressure I find in social media because it promotes a materialistic culture."
- Focus on less theory, more on personal relationship with God.
- While being open to the direction the Holy Spirit moves the conversation, do your best to stay on topic and relevant to the discussion content.

RUNNING THE GROUP: BEST PRACTICES

1. Always begin and end with prayer.

- If you are sharing the responsibility of formal prayer at small group, ask a person to lead prayer BEFORE the day of the small group so they can prepare if necessary.
- In the concluding prayer, mention some of the intentions shared throughout the small group.
- Try to gauge the spirituality and comfort level of those in your small group. It's important that no assumptions are made that could make someone feel out of place or closed off; for example, don't assume everyone knows the words to a worship song simply because it's popular at the time.
- Here is an example of a prayer that could be said at the beginning of small group: "Lord Jesus, you are good, and loving, and all-mighty. Thank you for being present here with us when we gather in your name. We ask that you bless our time together in small group and that you guide our conversation. In your name, we pray: Amen."

2. Have everyone sit on the same level in discussion to communicate equality.

3. Affirm the importance of each member's presence by referring to them by name in conversation.

4. Ask open-ended questions that provoke conversation.

5. Manage silence, don't be afraid of it.

- After receiving the formation, allow a few moments of intentional silence for members to think and pray about a prompt or discussion question. This will allow time for individuals to collect their thoughts.
- If no one speaks up when it is time to share, allow the group to sit in silence. After a few moments, inquire whether or not anyone would like to contribute their reflection.

6. Keep track of attendance so you can use the metric to assist in assessing the success of the small group.

7. Clarify the use of cell phones/technology during small groups.

8. Go easy on the content for your first gathering.

- At your first gathering, you want to allow for a relaxed environment that facilitates attendees getting to know one another. Plan more time for this on the first gathering than you typically would for the following gatherings.
- At the beginning of the discussion portion for your first gathering, go through both the Spiritual Foundations and Expectations of small group. Be sure to read them all. It may also be smart to remind attendees of these at the next few gatherings.
- As your attendees come to know one another and be more comfortable, you will be able to spend less time on activities designed to help with bonding.

9. Stay in contact with any organizer.

10. If you are coordinating your small group through the venue of a parish or ministry, stay in communication with the organizer, sharing with the organizer successes, struggles, etc.

11. Support members beyond small group.

- During small group, challenging topics or personal hardships may be shared. Seek and share resources to help each other grow in knowledge and find necessary support. As a leader, this is very important step in walking with another individual in his or her faith journey.
- Research, recommend, and potentially plan gatherings that take place outside of the small group commitment and connect the members to larger faith communities.

Appendices

How to Address Unique Personalities

When people come together and share authentically about their lives, it can sometimes get a little messy. Every group has unique personalities that manifest. Keep in mind that not only do people manifest different qualities on different days, but you have probably been each of these as well. It is not your job as the leader to break people of their bad habits, but to encourage and motivate them to be the best version of themselves.

“When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time.” — St. Francis de Sales

The following are common characterizations of members that can harm the cohesiveness of a group and some ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ on diffusing situations.

“CHATTY” MEMBERS

Usually very talkative and opinionated; extroverted and always willing to share. Provides a lot of value and content, but sometimes need to be reined in to allow other less vocal members a chance to share.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Acknowledge their points while asking for a response from another member in the group, by name if necessary, or ask for a response from each member. Try making eye contact with another member of the group while you ask a question to encourage them to respond. Recognize that at times, an individual may simply need the attention and care of the group (this is an exception, not a rule).

DON'T → Embarrass or shame them, even in jest, in front of the group.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Affirm their openness and willingness to share. Enlist them to assist you in drawing out sharing from the other members. Encourage them to ask questions as well of others. It is ok to point out that you want others to share as well.

DON'T → Discourage them from sharing at all or point out directly that they share too much. It may cause them to back off or feel affronted and possibly put up walls.

“SUPERFICIAL SHARER” MEMBERS

Only shares a portion of their lives or is focused only on the surface aspects. They may volunteer a lot of information but not a lot of substance. Are uncomfortable going deeper.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Encourage them to share about their lives by asking them direct questions about their thoughts or to share personal experiences with a topic. The more comfortable they get, the more likely they will share deeper content in the future.

DON'T → Speak to them in any sort of accusatory tone about not contributing or ignore their lack of sharing altogether. Both situations could cause them to continue to further close themselves off from the group.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Ask them about what is going on in their lives. Make a concerted effort to reach out to them specifically to let them know that you are happy they are in the group and can't wait to get to know them better and better each week.

DON'T → Directly call them out about how they share. Each person acclimates differently to the vulnerability within small groups and it is ok to give people time to become comfortable with opening up.

“WALL FLOWER, DISENGAGED” MEMBERS

Observes but doesn't share much. They may be engaged but shy or unsure, or simply more introverted than other members. May be overwhelmed by stronger personalities and inhibited from sharing.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Make a concerted effort to include them or pull them into the conversation. Ask specifically for their feedback or input on the topic, “What do you think...?”

DON'T → Call them out directly in front of the group or use aggressive language. They need to be inspired to share not required to share.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Reach out to let them know that their viewpoint is valued and desired. Remind them that they are in the group and committed for a reason and that others want to know their thoughts and struggles. Try to understand the reasons behind their seeming lack of participation (shyness, introversion, etc.).

DON'T → Assume they are not engaged in the conversation or do not care. This may just simply be a personality tendency.

“HERE’S WHAT I THINK” MEMBERS

Gives guidance from their own opinion and is not always based in the Bible or teachings of the Catholic Church. Not all counsel needs to be directly from those sources but all should be aligned with them.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Determine if the opinion might lead someone down the wrong path or be a detriment to their sanctification. Tactfully point out that what the person shared was an opinion and redirect the group to determine what Church teaching is on the subject.

DON’T → Call out the person directly or shame them for sharing an opinion.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → If an individual is frequently trying to promote their opinion, meet with the person and encourage him or her to seek Church teaching. You can use the desire to share and help others to lovingly challenge them to take knowledge of the faith deeper. Ask the person to help be an asset to the group by learning more about Church teaching.

DON’T → Discourage them from sharing.

“TERMINATOR AGGRESSIVE” MEMBERS

Has a lot of passion and strong opinions. May be strongly convicted about matters of theology and communicate convictions in an abrasive manner, without care of the individuals on the receiving end.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Attempt to diffuse the situation by acknowledging that emotion is involved and changing the course of the conversation to be less about emotion and more about Church teaching. Make sure that the aggressor knows that his/her presence is appreciated but that there is a need to be aware of the feelings of the entire group and to temper how sharing occurs.

DON'T → Ignore the feelings of the others in the group. Make sure any hurt feelings are addressed and defused outside of group time.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Remind the aggressive member that you appreciate the passion, but there are right and wrong ways to express emotions and communicate effectively. Try to understand where he or she might be coming from and what might be the cause of the emotions.

DON'T → Discount the impact that an aggressive personality can have on others. Make sure to check in with the other members. Also make sure to remind any members with hurt feelings that everyone is passionate about certain things and the aggressor's actions are not personal but most likely come from a place of intense emotion.

“ABSENT” MEMBERS

Consistently late or don’t show up at all, making repeated excuses for behavior.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Acknowledge the absence and encourage the other members to reach out.

DON'T → Allow the group to speak negatively about the absent member.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Reach out personally to the absent member. Try something that requires more effort like a phone call. If the time commitment is too much at the present time, you both can re-evaluate the member’s obligation to the group.

DON'T → Make assumptions about why the member is absent. Make sure to hear them out.

“DEBBIE DOWNER, SHIFT BLAME” MEMBERS

Always negative to the point where it begins affecting the group as a whole. Consistently look at the down side of everything and share unconstructive opinions and feedback regularly.

IN THE GROUP

DO → Be aware of negativity and address it by asking the member how the group can help or encourage them. Help them think of concrete things they can do to help their issues.

DON'T → Disregard or downplay their sharing. Ignoring it will only perpetuate it.

ONE-ON-ONE

DO → Share what you have observed and offer your help. Ask if there is anything specific you can pray for with that person and pray for them and with them. Remind them that the group is here to help and they are not alone in their struggles.

DON'T → Push too hard. Sometimes it takes gentle prodding and a little time for people to realize their own negativity.

Four Stages of Community

R.E.A.C.H., in conjunction with Clark Stevens, PhD, proposes four stages of community. It is helpful to understand these stages and have an awareness of which stage your small group is in. Doing so will help you care for the needs of your group in that time.

STAGE 1: HONEYMOON

“THIS IS AWESOME”

This stage is typically fun and interesting, as a new group embarks on the challenge and excitement of getting to know each other. It is characterized by a sense of ‘us’ as well as superficial relationships. This is totally ok. As the group meets more, the relationships will deepen into the next stage.

A lot of emphasis is put on similarities as the different personalities get to know each other and detect common traits. Differences are observed, but not important at this stage. Focus on the similarities, including common goals for the group in order to move forward.

STAGE 2: DIFFERENTIATION

“WOW, WE’RE DIFFERENT”

In this stage, the differences between members becomes more prominent. As each person becomes more comfortable and open, conflict can possibly arise. As this happens, the group needs to address the common goal of sanctification and encourage one another to celebrate their differences.

It can be easy for individual members to get discouraged and consider leaving the group. Keep in mind that this stage is common and happens in all group formations in all walks of life – school, jobs, and relationships.

STAGE 3: ACCEPTANCE

“THESE DIFFERENCES ARE GOOD”

In this stage, the diversity of the group is accepted and celebrated. The members begin to realize the value of differences and understand that they can assist each other in unique ways on their journey towards sanctification.

As conflicts arise, mastering conflict resolution will help the group continue to grow towards the peak of community.

STAGE 4: COMMUNITY

“WE NEED / LOVE EACH OTHER”

This stage is the apex of a community group. It is not without its difficulty, but overall the group is a functioning example of God’s desire for our lives within community. A great way to keep the momentum is to focus on sacrificial love, servant leadership and what that means for each other in the group.

Sharing Your Testimony

Your small group could decide to share personal testimonies as a way of glorifying God and getting to know one another. Below is information regarding how to form a testimony.

VISION: WHY TESTIMONIES?

To start, share with one another about your best friend and the impact that person has had on your life. Ultimately, this is exactly what you are doing in a testimony. Psalm 71:15 says, “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts; of your deeds of salvation all the day.... Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul.” As Christians, it is imperative that we are able to tell others about Him. 1 Peter 3:15 says, “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you.” The testimony is a powerful yet simple tool. Your task, if you choose to accept it, is to prepare a testimony that is three to five minutes long. Practice it with a disciple, other Christians, and eventually non-Christians. Later on, you can find ways to give a longer testimony of 10 to 20 minutes, suitable for larger audiences, and even a 30-second testimony to use in shorter conversations.

YOUR STORY IN FOUR ACTS (ACTS 26)

Let’s look at St. Paul’s testimony in Acts 26 as a way to prepare for your own testimony. In Acts 26, Paul has four parts, or “acts,” in his testimony:

1. Life before Jesus Christ
2. Coming to know Jesus Christ
3. Life in Jesus Christ
4. An invitation

Read Acts 26:1–29.

Discussion Question:

How does St. Paul’s testimony fit into the four acts? The answer is outlined below, along with some questions to consider as you think about each act.

ACT 1: MY LIFE BEFORE JESUS

Acts 26:1–11

What kind of a person was I socially, spiritually, and emotionally? Introduce a unifying theme to the testimony (for example, familiarity with Christ but no personal knowledge of Him, loneliness in college, spiritual hunger, or the Fatherhood of God). Paul’s unifying theme is his devotion to Judaism.

ACT 2: HOW I CAME TO KNOW HIM

Acts 26:12–18

What happened? Even if the conversion was gradual, the testimony should still have one concrete moment or turning point for the audience to grasp. If other people were involved in bringing about the conversion, take care to make sure this section is Christ-centered and not agent centered. Avoid any over-dramatization. God’s work in our lives is not always easy to express. Consider how you can organize your story so that people will understand what you have been through and who God is.

ACT 3: MY LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST

Acts 26:19–23

What changes have occurred in my life? How am I living my relationship with Jesus? Be especially careful here about the language you choose. Avoid using loaded words and phrases that could separate you from people who are not familiar with them, such as “follow the Spirit,” “indwelling of the Trinity,” “vocation,” “sacraments,” and “dark night of the soul.” Avoid extremes. Try hard not to come across as a perfected saint. At the same time, don’t dwell on struggles and failures.

ACT 4: CHALLENGE & INVITATION

Acts 26:27–29

Ask the audience, implicitly or explicitly, “How will you respond to Jesus Christ?”

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD TESTIMONY (CAST)

When telling your story, keep these four elements in mind:

CONCRETENESS:

The audience is given “handles” to the testimony. Experiences, places, and persons are described accurately and unambiguously, yet without obsession over detail. The turning point (how one came to know Jesus Christ) is identifiable and specific, even if it is just one of many turning

points. The person giving the testimony comes across as real and ordinary.

ACCESSIBILITY:

The experiences are described in such a way that the audience can relate to or understand them. The language chosen is free from religious terms and dense terminology that could separate the speaker from the audience, like “sin,” “tabernacle,” and “Eucharistic adoration.”

SIMPLICITY:

The “plot” or “thread” of the testimony is clear and easy to follow, without confusing tangents and elaborate details. Jesus Christ is at the center of this testimony. He is its hinge.

THEMATIC STRUCTURE:

There is one overarching theme or analogy. Every point of the testimony should in some way be related to this single theme.

CONCLUSION

Testimonies are crucial, not only for telling others about God, but also for reminding yourself of what the Lord has done in your own life. Memorizing yours and being able to share it with others will reaffirm your own experience and provide an easy way to introduce others to Christ.

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