

YOUNG ADULT
SMALL GROUPS

A GUIDE FOR
FACILITATORS



YOUTH, YOUNG ADULT,
& CAMPUS MINISTRIES
DIOCESE OF DALLAS

small christian communities

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your decision to serve as a small group facilitator! Your role will make a significant impact in the success and fruitfulness of your small group.

As facilitator, you will:

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

Your small group coordinator will provide you with the following:

- Basic information about your small group such as purpose, location, time, frequency, duration, etc.
- List of members' names
- Content for formation and discussion
- Direction regarding prayer
- Schedule of the small group meetings

TIPS FOR YOUR ROLE

- Meet beforehand with the coordinator to review the schedule of the small group gathering and the hopes of the coordinator.
- Preview (and prepare, if needed) the content for the small group meetings.
- Touch base with the coordinator in between gatherings to check in to see how the group is going. This includes the general dynamics of the group, as well as your skills with facilitating.
- Read and familiarize yourself with the Spiritual Foundations and Expectations. See below. These will be read at the first gathering and at further gatherings as needed.
- Familiarize yourself with this guide's "How to Address Unique Personalities".
- Remember the importance of prayer during this experience. Rely heavily upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit during discussion, intercede for the small group members in between gatherings, and keep your relationship with Jesus as the foremost priority.

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: 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 wellbeing 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 activ-

ities 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.

Appendix: How to Address Unique Personalities

When people come together and share authentically about their lives, it can get a little messy. Every group has unique personalities that manifest and some of them can be challenging. It is not your job as the coordinator or facilitator 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.

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