

# LAUNCHING SMALL GROUPS IN A PARISH



## INTRODUCTION

Small groups play a key role in the Grow stage of the Detroit Model of Evangelization. Just like Jesus and His apostles, small groups cultivate meaningful relationships, engage with God's Word, and grow in spiritual maturity. Together, they deepen their lives of discipleship, serve alongside each other in ministry, and grow in their zeal to share the love of Christ. *Unleash the Gospel* encourages parishes to form small groups:

One effective way to foster communion is to form well-planned small groups in which the members meet regularly for Bible study or faith formation as well as mutual support, encouragement, and growth in holiness. Social events can also go a long way toward building relationships. It is important to keep in mind that fellowship in the Church is not for its own sake, but is always centered on the Person of Christ. (Marker 3.1)

Forming family discipleship groups, responsive to the needs of the community, that gather in homes to accompany one another with the joys and struggles of life. (Action Step 1.2.2)

Small group ministry isn't complicated, but it does take some planning. This document gives a high-level overview of everything you need to know to launch small groups at your parish. The information is grouped into four sections:

1. What is a Small Group?
2. Nuts and Bolts of Small Group Meetings
3. Preparing to Launch Small Groups
4. Launching Small Groups

## WHAT IS A SMALL GROUP?

A small group is a gathering of six to ten people who meet regularly to connect with others and grow in faith together. Groups generally have a leader who facilitates conversation and ensures that the group runs smoothly. Small groups can be composed of a uniform demographic such as all men, all women, couples, families, and youth, or they can be a mix of men and women in different age groups and stages of life. Generally, members of a small group are in similar stages

in their faith journey since those who are new to the faith have different goals and different types of conversation than those who are committed disciples.

There are many different types of small groups, each having their own focus and dynamic. Here are the most common types of small groups:

- **PRAYER GROUPS**: The purpose of a prayer group is to come together to pray. Prayer groups often intercede for others (i.e. children, family, the parish, particular intentions) and pray for each other when they meet.
- **FAITH SHARING AND DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS**: The purpose of these groups is to grow in virtue and the habits of discipleship. Members share life's joys and struggles with one another and encourage each other in upholding Gospel values. Group meetings include prayer and discussion of materials that explore Christian living.
- **STUDY GROUPS**: The purpose of this group is to grow in knowledge in a particular aspect of the faith. Groups may study Sacred Scripture, teachings of the faith, Church documents, or other writings that explore the Catholic faith.

## **NUTS AND BOLTS OF SMALL GROUP MEETINGS**

This section explores the duration, meeting length, meeting location and the structure of small group meetings.

Duration of Small Group Meetings: The duration of small group meetings varies greatly. Some groups meet for six or eight weeks at a time, while others meet weekly or bi-monthly from September through May. Some groups meet year-round. Youth and teen small groups often meet on a monthly basis in order to help them balance school and extra-curricular activities.

The number of weeks really depends on the type of group that is formed and the study materials that are being used. Some studies lend themselves to shorter cycles while others require more time. It is important to set a timeline that group members can commit to. Shorter cycles may be more attractive to those who are new to small groups and would be reluctant to make a long-term commitment. It is very common for groups to form initially for a short-term cycle but then stay together for years because of the bonds of friendship and the spiritual growth that is shared by the members.

Meeting Length: Most small groups meet anywhere from 90 minutes to two hours. The primary driver of people joining groups is the level of community or caring relationships that the members experience. In longer meetings, people have more opportunities to deepen relationships. If the group is sharing a meal together, the meeting length can be extended as appropriate.

Meeting Location: Small groups can meet in members' homes or at the parish. Some parishes offer on-site parent groups during religious education classes so that parents can meet while their children are in class. Some small groups may choose to meet in a coffee shop. The location should be warm and welcoming, free of excessive noise that will prevent group members from sharing and hearing, and a place that will comfortably accommodate all members. Small groups can also happen online and can be convenient when in-person gatherings are not possible due to business travel, geographical distance, social distancing, and babysitting needs. Discussions, prayer, encouragement, worship, and fun can all happen online, albeit slightly differently.

Many platforms exist to connect people digitally. The two most popular are Google Hangouts and Zoom:

- **GOOGLE HANGOUTS:** Each Hangout allows an unlimited amount of time via the web browser or Google Hangout app. Please note: all participants need to have a Google account. Visit <https://hangouts.google.com/> for more information.
- **ZOOM:** Meet for 40 minutes for free or upgrade to a paid plan for unlimited time video conferencing on a mobile device or a desktop computer. Find out more by visiting <https://zoom.us/>

Meeting Structure: The small group meeting structure depends on the type of small group it is, and whether a meal is being shared. Listed below is a sample timeline of a 90-minute study group. This sample shows the typical structure of a small group meeting; however, the structure can be adapted as needed.

10 minutes—Gather, Socialize, Introductory Questions

5 minutes—Opening Prayer

60 minutes—Content from resource and discussion

10 minutes—Closing Prayer with intentions

5 minutes—Announcements, socialize, good-byes

\* If your group will share a meal together, consider adding 30-45 minutes to the beginning of the session.

## PREPARING TO LAUNCH SMALL GROUPS

The preparation phase is one of the most important aspects of launching small groups in a parish. Good preparation begins with appointing a Small Group Coordinator. This person can be a part-time staff member or a volunteer. The Small Group Coordinator is responsible

for the direct oversight of all facets of small group ministry. This includes the following responsibilities:

- » Together with the pastor and staff, establishing a vision and setting goals for small group ministry
- » Planning content and providing small group resources that are in line with your goals
- » Training small group leaders
- » Developing a way to start new groups, managing group membership, and facilitating communication with groups leaders and members
- » Coordinating parish events to advertise and launch small groups

Vision, Goals and Content: Establishing a vision and setting goals for small group ministry will help focus your efforts. Consider the type of groups you want to form and the audience you are trying to attract. Will small groups be used primarily as a means for evangelization or encounter or will they be geared toward those who have already encountered Christ and want to grow in the habits of discipleship? Is it your goal to establish groups who will grow more groups (spiritual multiplication) or is it your hope that the groups that are formed will stay together for an indefinite amount of time?

The content that is offered to small groups should flow from the goals that are established. (See the SPARK Knowledgebase for [small group content ideas](#).) Groups that are focused on Bible study have numerous resources to choose from. Some groups opt to study a particular book of the Bible or study and reflect on the Sunday readings as they appear in the Lectionary. Small Group Coordinators may work with their Faith Formation leaders to establish a “curriculum” of resources that build on one another and can be used over the course of a year or more.

Small Group Leaders: Identifying and forming small group leaders is an important aspect of launching small groups. Small group leaders can make or break a small group. There is an art to facilitating conversation and managing personalities in a group. Small group discussion can get derailed by those who are excessive talkers, debaters, or those who always have the “right” answer. It is the role of the small group leader to maintain an environment of open and charitable discussion where everyone has an opportunity to participate. Leaders also want to create and maintain an environment that is conducive to prayer and encounter with Jesus.

Keep in mind the following acronym when identifying potential small group leaders: F.A.C.T (Faithful, Available, Contagious, and Teachable). Ideally, a small group leader should be a *faithful* disciple of Jesus, committed to personal spiritual growth, and able to actively model and talk about personal prayer. It is best to invite individuals who are not already leading other ministries but those who are *available* to dedicate their time to accompanying others in faith. Because small group leaders are in a position to inspire and influence others, it is best to invite those whose faith is *contagious*. It is also important for leaders to be *teachable* since it shows

humility and the willingness to grow and learn from the experiences of others.

In addition to the characteristics above, it is helpful to identify small group leaders who have the charisms for leading small groups. Charisms are gifts of the Spirit used to gather, sanctify, and minister life in the Church. The following charisms are well-suited for leading small groups:

- **CHARISM OF PASTORING:** Individuals with this charism build communities by nurturing relationships between members and by fostering a group's long-term spiritual growth.
- **CHARISM OF HOSPITALITY:** The charism of hospitality is the gift of making a sense of home for people where they feel safe and cared for. Hospitality is the bridge between the individual and the community. People with this charism build a sense of being cared for as an individual, but also a sense of belonging to the greater community.
- **CHARISM OF ENCOURAGEMENT:** The charism of encouragement is the gift of nurturing the individual person and calling out each person's gifts.

There are a variety of ways to train small group leaders. The easiest way is to hand-pick six to ten potential leaders, form a small group, and pilot the study you want to roll out to the whole parish. During the study, members can discuss prayer and facilitation techniques and take turns practicing these skills during the pilot study. Discussion should also include:

- » Sharing the vision and goals for your small groups
- » All the practical information for best practices on the roles and do's and don'ts of leading small groups (See the Small Group Leader Guide in Appendix A for more details.)
- » Any relevant information from the leader guide of the resource that is being used
- » Safe environment policies

Once the pilot is complete, each member can then start his or her own small group. It is a good idea for the parish Small Group Coordinator to create a structure of accountability for leaders, and host quarterly or semi-annual meetings for ongoing formation, support, and to share best practices.

Managing Membership: Prior to launching small groups, the Small Group Coordinator needs to establish a process for creating small groups and managing small group membership. How will members sign up for a group? Most parishes use their parish website to recruit new members. The web page can either allow members to submit their contact information (and the Small Group Coordinator assigns them to a group) or list descriptions of the group and leader and allow members to submit a request to join a specific group. Small Group Coordinators

may choose to manage this data in Excel for a small number of groups or use a web-based relationship management tool to manage a large number of groups. Relationship management tools not only track members, but also allow Small Group Coordinators to communicate easily with members and leaders.

Small Group Coordinators may consider seeking the advice of a parishioner or staff member who has IT experience to help establish a system that works for your parish. Alternatively, the Archdiocese of Detroit Process, Data & Technology Group is available to come to your parish and help you assess an online solution that meets your needs. For more information contact Dennis O'Flynn at 313-596-7167 or oflynn.denns@aod.org.

## LAUNCHING SMALL GROUPS

Once your parish has taken the steps to prepare for small group ministry, it's time to make it happen!

Casting a Vision: About a month before small groups kick off, it is important to cast a vision for your parishioners to help them know how small groups will benefit them and advertise the specifics of the small group ministry. For many Catholics, small groups are a new concept, and they may not sign up unless they are convinced that it will make a difference in their lives. Here are some ways to inspire and encourage small group participation:

- » **Most effective**: Preach/talk about the small group initiative from the pulpit.
- » Invite those who have had a small group experience to give a 3-minute testimony before or after Mass.
- » Write articles/testimonies in the bulletin and post on the parish website and social media channels.
- » Have a staffed information table in the vestibule before and after weekend Masses that has information about the small group ministry you are about to launch. Include sign-up sheets and samples of study materials.

Sign-Up Weekend: About two weeks before kick-off, have a sign-up weekend to invite people to either sign up on the website or stop at the information table and sign up for a small group. Take advantage of times of the year when individuals are more open to an invitation to be part of a small group:

- » Beginning of the school year
- » Beginning of a new calendar year as part of a New Year's resolution
- » The seasons of Advent or Lent. Schedule an "invitation weekend" to get families to sign up.

Don't forget the power of personal invitation. Invite clergy, staff, key volunteers, and parishioners at large to invite people they know to join a small group. Some parishes opt to host a "mixer event" where people meet and connect with others who are in the same stage of life or who live in the same part of town and have the opportunity to form small groups based on these encounters.

Kick-off: Once members are assigned to small groups, the parish Small Group Coordinator shares member contact information and distributes materials as appropriate. Prior to the first meeting, it is important for Small Group Leaders to get in touch with individual members to welcome them and communicate any details about the first session.

Follow-up and Evaluation: Once small group sessions are under way, it is important for the Small Group Coordinator to check in with leaders to see how things are going and offer support and resources as needed. When the first cycle of small group sessions is complete, parishes may consider surveying leaders and members about their experience and consider ways to improve small group ministry in the future.

## **HELP AND SUPPORT FROM THE DEPARTMENT EVANGELIZATION AND MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP**

Starting small groups may seem like a daunting task, but it is well worth the effort. The Department of Evangelization and Missionary Discipleship has worked with numerous parishes who have a successful small group ministry and are ready and willing to accompany parishes in this process. If your parish needs help with launching small groups, please contact [evangelization@aod.org](mailto:evangelization@aod.org) to connect with someone who can help.

## APPENDIX A – SMALL GROUP LEADER GUIDE

Leading a small group takes some skill and practice. There is a lot written on how to lead a small group and how not to lead one. Here is a compilation of some best practices that will assist you in making the small group a life-changing experience for all.

**1. Pray for each member of your group, for your leadership, and before each meeting.**

**2. Demonstrate Hospitality.**

**3. Know Your Role** - As a small group leader, you take on the following roles:

### *Facilitator*

- » You are not the teacher, but you facilitate the discussion, and create an environment of encounter with Christ through the Word, discussion, and prayer.
- » Listen carefully; do not interrupt.
- » You do not need all the answers but are willing to help each other find answers.
- » Turn to trusted sources for help in understanding Church teachings with which you struggle.

### *Encourager*

- » Give positive and genuine affirmation for everyone's contributions.
- » Maintain a positive attitude.

### *Director of Conversation*

- » Avoid unhelpful tangents.
- » Encourage participation from everyone.
- » Ask open-ended questions.
- » Do not dominate the conversation.
- » Prevent others from dominating.
- » Re-phrase comments for clarity. For example, "What I hear you saying is . . ."
- » Allow for periods of silence as a normal part of small group discussion.
- » Maintain healthy boundaries in group sharing.
- » Pace the conversation, and keep it pleasing to the Holy Spirit (avoid gossip, excessive complaining, etc.).
- » Start and end on time.

### *Preparer*

- » Review and pray with discussion material in advance.
- » Prepare questions to encourage conversation in advance.

- Launching Questions – What are your initial thoughts? What stands out to you?
  - Observation Questions – What does this content/passage reveal to you? What do you observe about the content/passage that was shared?
  - Understanding Questions – Why is this content/passage important? Do you understand what it means?
  - Application Questions – How does this content apply to you? What will you do now?
- » Come with 2 or 3 key things you are ready to share with your group, when needed.

**4. Remember Introductions** - Ask each member to introduce themselves (name and one or two facts about themselves), going first as the leader, setting an example of a brief self-introduction.

**5. Share the Vision and Format** - Share why you are excited to lead the small group and why you chose to do this. Share the vision and specific goals of the small group (i.e. that it leads to greater growth in relationship with God and each other. The hope is that this experience also inspires members to share Christ by inviting others to the small group or by eventually forming an additional one to lead on their own.). Explain the basic format of how each meeting will be structured and the content you will be using.

**6. Time and Date** - Confirm the group meeting time and dates. Get a commitment from group members to make this a priority as much as reasonably possible.

**7. Group Communication Outside Meetings** - Decide as a group on the best method of communication outside of meetings (texting, email, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, GroupMe, etc.).

**8. Group Communication Within Meetings** - Discuss with your group members the following expectations and etiquette for group communication within meetings.

*General Expectations*

- » All members have a responsibility to set a tone and group culture that is respectful, humble, open, honest, non-judgmental, and loving.
- » Silence in group discussion is to be expected and an important part of the experience.
- » Members are encouraged to share while maintaining a balance of participating without dominating.
- » Members will listen respectfully and not interrupt one another.

- » All members agree to keep confidential anything personal shared in the group, unless what is shared is about someone harming themselves or someone else.
- » Members are encouraged to pray for one another in between meetings.

#### *Online Communication Etiquette & Suggestions*

- » Make sure all members are comfortable with their controls (muting, video on/off, chat options, speaker vs. gallery view, etc.).
- » Remind members that while their video is on, they can be seen by everyone, and while their microphone is on, they (and all household noises) can be heard by everyone.
- » Encourage members to turn their video on during the meeting to help people connect by seeing each other.
- » When members are not speaking, encourage them to mute themselves to avoid background noise and echoes.
- » During group prayer or readings, have one person say the prayer or reading out loud while others are muted, or have members take turns with different parts of the prayer or reading.
- » Consider using screen share options to share prayers, readings, videos, etc. with the group.

### **9. Prepare for Temptations and Challenges**

- » Expect when doing something that is pleasing to the Lord, to experience spiritual resistance through frustrations, temptations, and challenging situations. Pray and rely on Jesus and His Spirit to lead, guide and steady you.
- » If there are any pastoral situations that arise in your small group, contact a parish staff member for assistance and guidance.
- » Remember Legal Obligations
  - If a small group consists of any members who are vulnerable adults or people under 18 years old, the group leader is required to undergo a background check, participate in the Protecting God's Children training program, and abide by the Archdiocese of Detroit's Safe Environments Policy and Volunteer Code of Conduct.
  - Small groups are sometimes the only safe and intimate environments where members of your community can disclose the more painful aspects of their lives. For this reason, it's not uncommon for a small group leader

to become aware of activities that are illegal or harmful such as substance abuse, neglect or abuse of a child or adult, suicidal ideation or mental health problems, and domestic issues. Small group leaders should be aware of any legal or moral obligation to report these activities or connect their small group members to parish staff members who can provide helpful resources. Government agencies, such as the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services, and the Archdiocese of Detroit Department of Human Resources are available to help parish staff members identify such resources when needed. More information can be found at <http://protect.aod.org>. These policies and procedures will ensure that your small groups remain a safe and accountable place where all group members can flourish!