

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.

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 clergyperson 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.