

A Guide to Developing a Small Group

If you want to delve deeper into your faith but you're not sure what to do next, creating a small group might be a great place to start! When we share with others the ways that we have encountered God we deepen our own faith and help others grow in theirs. Not only that, we also begin to see more clearly the ways that God is leading and calling us. Here are a few questions to consider as you think about forming your own small group:

What is a Small Group?

A small group is an intentional community developed to invite participants into greater intentionality in their life of faith. Members of the group can be from the same faith background striving to support each other in their way of encountering God or they can be from a range of faith communities seeking to grow in awareness of the ways that others integrate faith into their lives. The key is that the group is centered on mutual respect and the desire to help each other grow in their authenticity in their relationship with their neighbor and the divine.

Why form a Small Group?

An effective small group faith sharing experience positively reinforces the importance of a life of faith. They provide a space for engaging questions and thoughts that can help create a foundation for ongoing growth and capacity to live an authentic life of faith. Involvement in a group can help a person to engage in this aspect of their life that then leads to a greater capacity for relationship with God and with those they encounter along the way. We all need encouragement and support as we walk our journey of faith and small groups can provide this. Small groups also have the capacity to provide:

- Greater comfort in conversations about faith.
- Developed ability to articulate one's own thoughts and beliefs related to faith.
- Greater awareness of resources that will support a developing life of faith.
- Encouragement to work on one's personal prayer.
- Encouragement to participate in a church community
- Growth in confidence for forming and leading a small group

The spiritual journey is never a path we are meant to walk on our own; it is something that we share with all our fellow believers, past, present, and future.

What do I need to start a small group?

The basics are pretty simple: a place and time to meet, a group of people to meet with, and a plan for how to spend your time together. Yet there are many details that are helpful to attend to in order for your small group to offer all that it has the potential to offer to those who participate. Below are some points that can help you through the process of setting up and leading a small group.

Who should I invite to join the Small Group?

Deciding who to invite to your small group is an important part of the process. Small groups tend to work best with 5-8 members (note: this means you will probably need to invite as many as 15 people to get a group this size). A key consideration to start out with is whether your group will be single sex or mixed. Consider what will make you and the others in your group feel most comfortable sharing. Many groups will end up discussing important and personal topics, so gathering a group that is able to build trust with each other is key.

Start with thinking about 2-4 people who you know well and who you think would be interested in being a part of your small group. Then set a time that would work for you. It can be hard to find a time that will work for a group of 8 people, so set the time when you have an initial couple people. Then reach out to other people who you think might benefit from such an opportunity. Try to think of people who will be willing to engage positively in the group. These can be friends, people you know from your residence hall or classes, or others who you think might benefit from participating in the group. Challenge yourself to reach out to people have much experience with a small group or who do not have strong ties to a faith community – this might be just the thing they need to get more connected. Be ok with the fact that some may say no – it is inevitable. Yet still try with some folks who you think might not be interested, it is sometimes surprising how many people are looking for just such an opportunity.

A couple things to consider as you extend your invitations: Make the invitation personal – large general invitations do not work as well as one on one invitations. Invite more people than you expect to be there – some may not show. Consider allowing those you invite to invite their friends. Consider a few invitations that might stretch you or the one who is invited. Be confident in inviting them – you have something good here, make sure that comes through in your invitation. Consider some people who may be on the margins and invite them to be a part of this opportunity.

Where/When/How often should we meet?

The place and time your small group meets is up to you and the other group members. You will want to find a place that is generally quiet and easily accessible (a chapel could be a good option). It is good to have a space with minimal distractions or not too many people walking through. Meeting in a consistent location will help your group develop a routine, and this will help with attendance. Also consider whether you plan to have food as a regular element to

your small group and how that will affect where you will meet – it is not appropriate to have food and drink in chapels.

Setting a time to meet is one of the most difficult parts of starting a small group. The best thing to do is to choose a time that you think would work for most people and then set your first meeting. If there are a couple of people who you want to be part of the group, you can check with them first. Coordinating schedules with a whole list of potential group members, however, can take weeks and tends not to be very fruitful. The frequency of your meetings will depend on the nature of your group. Meeting every week is best for faith sharing and Bible study groups. Other groups could meet bi-monthly. Either way, consistency is key. If at all possible, avoid cancelling meetings or changing the time and place. For most groups it is best for the meetings to last for an hour.

What will we do when we gather?

Small groups are a pretty flexible format in relation to the content that you can use. There are many different things that you can do or discuss when your small group meets. Consider what you hope to be able to cover and then develop your format around that. Small groups can be:

- Faith Sharing: Discuss together the ways that God has been moving in your lives since the last meeting.
- Bible Study: Explore together the meaning, importance, and impact of God's Word.
- Lectionary Based: read the readings for the coming weekend's liturgy and discuss.
- Book Club: together read and discuss books related to faith, spirituality, church, etc.
- Contemplative Prayer Group: Engage together in the practice of Centering Prayer and then spend time reflecting on that experience.
- Topical: work through a series of topics that your group is interested in discussing or learning more about. Seek out articles or resource on each topic.

These are just a few examples of what your small group can do. Whatever it is, the point of the group is to grow together in your relationship with God. The group can also be a way for members to hold each other accountable and support those who are struggling.

If you are just starting out in your experience of leading a small group, it's best to start out with an established program. As you become more familiar with the structure and dynamics of a small group you can create your own. There are a whole range of established programs referenced in the Resources section below.

How do I structure the individual meetings?

This is pretty flexible as well. Find a good pattern that allows time to settle into the space but also provides plenty of time for the group to get to the content that you would like to cover. Make sure to have a set start and stop time. It is best to keep it to 1 hour. People will stop coming if group consistently goes over. Coming early to make sure that everything is set and ready to go when people arrive can help with getting started on time. You can also have more space for conversation after the official conclusion of the time together, but having that set ending of the formal meeting can provide people the chance to go if they need to.

Below is a possible flow of a small group meeting:

- Saying hello/Getting food (if available) – 5 minutes
- Highs/Lows of the week [All Group Members] – 5 minutes
- Opening Prayer [Group Member] – 5 minutes
- Introduce theme/Read Scripture passage [Leader] – 10 minutes
- Group discussion [All Group Members] – 30 minutes
- Discussion Summary/Wrap-up, preview of next week, and closing prayer [Leader] – 5 minutes

It is ok to set your own plan for how the meetings will be structured, but it is good to have a plan going into each meeting so that you can keep to the time people have set aside for the group.

Do I need to do anything between meetings?

Spending time together outside of the official small group meetings can also be a powerful way to grow together and can help with retention. Whether it is one-on-one or with the whole group, eating meals together, exercising together, going to a movie together, or doing fun activities together will build trust in the group and enhance your effectiveness of your small group.

Keeping in touch with the members of your group can also help to keep up attendance at the meetings. This can be done by:

- Email a recap of the Small Group in the days after.
- Ask for prayer intentions during the small group meeting, invite members to pray for each other between meetings.
- Do something “other” from time to time
- Have participants meet up for coffee/tea one on one between meetings to get to know each other better.
- Text or email the day before a meeting to note that you are looking forward to seeing them at the next meeting.

Anything else I need to know about leading a small group?

Leading a small group can be a wonderfully rewarding opportunity. It can also be challenging at times. Here are a few best practices for leading a small group:

- **Lead:** The group needs a leader (maybe two). If everyone is responsible, no one is. Be firm and directive, but also inviting and hospitable.
- **It is not about you:** The group leader is not a dictator. It is not a time for the leader simply to share his/her thoughts about the topic. You are providing a space that invites all present to participate.
- **Ask Good Questions:** Open-ended questions are the sort that facilitate participation. They invite more than just a “yes” or “no” answer. E.g. What do you think about..., What experiences have you had that..., How does this relate to...
- **Set Guidelines:** these would be things that the group would agree to in order to provide accountability and a safe space. They would relate to confidentiality, attendance, inviting new people, etc.
- **Be Prepared:** come early to set the space and greet people as they arrive. Read over the material and have some good questions ready to help prompt the conversation.
- **Help the Conversation:** encourage those who are shy and reign in those who might dominate the conversation. Help keep the conversation on track by drawing things back to the topic at hand if it gets too far off topic.
- **Make Space for Prayer:** pray for your group in between meetings. Invite your participants to note prayer intentions. Find a way to open and close in prayer – you can have different participants lead this part.
- **Break the Ice:** the first session can be a bit more informal so that people can get to know each other. Find a way to ease into each time instead of trying to drop right into the heart of the topic. Know that the conversations might be a bit more superficial as they get to know each other, but also offer questions that encourage them to go deeper.
- **Inter-Faith/Inter-Denominational Groups:** It’s best not to pretend that differences don’t exist. Instead, acknowledge them and then decide as a group what kinds of topics you’ll choose, the ways that you’ll pray together, how much you’ll want to discuss fundamental theological differences, etc.
- **Beyond the Small Group:** the small group experience is a powerful way for people to engage in conversation and reflection on their faith life, yet it is not the faith life itself. A full life of faith includes personal prayer, works of service, and connection to a church community. As your group matures, consider finding ways to encourage members to engage in these other aspects of the faith life.

What should I do now?

You will probably want to start by talking to a few people to see if they would be interested in joining you in a small group. Then, go out and start it! There will certainly be challenges as you get going, but forming a small group is worth the effort. You can always reach out to the Campus Ministry staff for support and guidance. Forming a small group while at UP can also prepare you to do the same after you graduate. Connecting with other people of faith is a great way to build a lifelong faith.

Resources

Veronica Bathon (bathon@up.edu), the Campus Minister for Faith Formation, is here to help. Indeed, all members of Campus Ministry can serve as a resource to you. In addition to help with starting the small group, Campus Ministry can help with resources for prayer as a part of your small group. CM might also be able to help cover costs for books or other resources needed for your group. Drop us a line and ask about how we might support your effort in starting a small group.

Other on-campus resources include Pastoral Residents, Hall Directors, Assistant Hall Directors, other Holy Cross priests and brothers on campus.

Here are a few other online resources:

- **Contemplative Outreach** (<http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>): This is a great website for those looking to start a contemplative prayer group. It gives helpful tips and pointers on what contemplative prayer is and how it allows for growth in our relationship with God.
- **Evangelical Catholic** (<https://www.evangelicalcatholic.org/materials/>): This site carries a great catalog of small group resources prepared particularly for college students.
- **FOCUS Bible Study** (<https://focusoncampus.org/find-a-study>): FOCUS provides a great list of resources on how to start a bible study and what passage, tools, etc.
- **Cru** (<https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/bible-studies/the-community.html>): Find additional bible studies and further resources.
- **The US Conference of Catholic Bishops**: The US Bishops provide some wonderful material that can support a range of small group topics:
 - College Small Group Guides: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/campus-ministry/tools-for-action/campus-small-groups.cfm>
 - Daily Scripture Readings: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/>
 - Catholic Social Teaching: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/index.cfm>

- Faithful Citizenship: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/adult-education-and-small-faith-community-sharing-on-the-topic-of-faithful-citizenship.cfm>
- **Steubenville Fuel Small Group Resources:** <https://steubenvillefuel.com/small-group/>
- **Endow Groups** (<https://endowgroups.org>): Women answering questions about life, theology, work and family covering the philosophical and the everyday.
- **Online Video Resources for Topical Conversations:**
 - Word on Fire: <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/>
 - Fr. Mike Schmitz: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeXS0cAkuTPpJ6j3eH59WudJhJ4q1tpwH>
 - Chris Stefanick and Real Life Catholic: <https://reallifecatholic.com/>

If you know of other resources that we should include in this list, feel free to let us know.

Small group checklist – Getting started

- Choose a type of small group (i.e. Bible study, prayer group, discussion group, book club)
- Talk to a couple of people to gauge interest
- Choose a meeting time and place. Make room reservations if needed
- Begin to plan the first few sessions
- Invite people to join the group – Do it individually and in person. Large group announcements generally do not yield much (remember that you'll probably need to invite 10-15 people to get a group of 5-8)
- Keep a list of those who have expressed interest in coming. Get their phone numbers
- Prepare for the first meeting: Gather materials, arrange for snacks (if desired), review theme and questions again
- Text a reminder to each small group member (individually) the day of the meeting reminding them of the time and place and expressing your hope that they'll make it
- Arrive early to set up and greet everyone for the first meeting
- Say a prayer that the Holy Spirit will be with you as you lead the first meeting