

Forming Adults through Small Groups

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For Reflection

- (1) And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- (2) For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)
- (3) With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:8)
- (4) One way of renewing parishes... might be to consider the parish as a community of communities and movements. (141) It seems timely therefore to form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allows for true human relationships... In such a human context, it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word, and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ. (142) ... In this way, every parish... can promote nowadays a more person-centered evangelization and better cooperate with other social, educational and community work. (St. JP II, *Ecclesia in America*, 42)
- (5) The greatest gift you give those you lead is your own authentic walk with God. Too often we focus on growing the ministry organizationally instead of growing our leaders spiritually. (Lance Witt, in Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose*, 155)

The goal of a Catholic/Christian small group is to draw adults into transformative friendship with God and one another through authentic community, God's Word, and shared prayer.

A formula to keep in mind:

Life

Growth

Mission

4+1 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

CHECKLIST

Use this checklist for self reflection and conversations with your point person after you start your small group.

1

LAUNCHING DISCUSSION

(5 to 15 minutes)

- How is the quality of your opening discussions? Are they natural and effective?
- Have you found a good rhythm that is working for your group right now? Or do you need to mix these up and try different things?
- Do you use this time to check in on prayer lives and/or the last weekly challenge?

2

DISCUSSION OF GOD'S WORD

(40 to 60 minutes)

- What topic(s) or resources is your group currently engaged in? On the horizon?
 - How is the overall quality of your discussions?
 - How well are your conversations flowing from initial observation to understanding to application? Any particular trouble spots?
 - Are there challenges or trends in the dynamics of discussion to which you need to give extra prayer and attention? (Any dominators, particularly quiet people, etc.?)
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3

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

(Up to 5 minutes)

- How faithful are your group members to doing these and sharing about them?
- To what extent are people growing in a consistent prayer life, to your knowledge?
- How might you more effectively get people invested in these challenges?

4

GROUP PRAYER

(5 to 15 minutes)

- How does your group currently pray together?
- How has the group's prayer deepened or changed over time?
- Have you found a good rhythm that is working for your group right now? Or do you need to mix these up and try different methods?

+1

FRIENDSHIP AND TRUST

- How conducive is the setting of your group for natural conversations to take place before, during, and after group sessions?
 - Are you or another host providing some simple refreshments?
-

TIPS FOR MAKING INVITATIONS

Start inviting early, in advance of any organized publicity.

- This group is *yours*. Own it! Don't rely on organized publicity to fill your group.
- It can take time to connect with people and for them to think over your invite. Don't wait! Get started inviting as soon as possible.

Face-to-face invitations work best.

- Face-to-face invitations are the most personal of personal invitations. You can express warmth, enthusiasm, and personal care best in person. Inviting in-person also allows you to answer any questions your invitee may have in real time. Lastly, your friendly smile and kind words will stick with your invitee as they consider whether to say yes!
- If a face-to-face invitation is simply impossible, the next best option is a phone call. Our voices carry a wealth of meaning beyond what our words convey. If they don't pick up, leave a quick message. Trying calling again in the next few days if you don't hear back.
- Next best is any form of written communication addressed to an individual. Depending on your relationship with the person, this could be a handwritten note in the mail, an email, a text message, or a private message on social media. Do *not* invite via a group email or text.
- Tip: If you use social media such as Facebook, note the date of the last post from this person. If it is many months back, they are probably not a regular user of this platform. Find another option.

Mention the purpose of the group in brief casual language, using your own words. For example:

- "The purpose is pretty simple: to grow closer to God and one another through the discussing life and some Bible passages."
- "We'll read short selections from the Bible readings of the upcoming Sunday Mass and reflect on how they apply to our lives. We'll also share some of our own stories and prayer intentions to get to know one another better."

Mention the initial duration of the small group

- EC Lenten small group guides are eight weeks; other EC guides are seven weeks.
- This frees people from the fear that they would be saying yes to an undetermined or vague time frame. If they have a good experience, they can always decide to stay if you continue the group beyond the initial period.

Convey your excitement and care for them!

- Tell them that you would love them to be a part of your group!
- Don't worry about covering all the details of what the group will do. You can give more info after they respond.

Be yourself!

Optional: Host a social to share the idea

If you're struggling to find people interested in a small group, you could host a social gathering first, to connect people and share the idea in a compelling way. ~~An invitation to this social might sound something like the following.~~

LAUNCHING DISCUSSIONS

The general goal of the small group launching discussion is simple: get people talking. Even better: get people sharing meaningful things in a simple and nonthreatening way. This builds trust and paves the way for deeper sharing when discussing God's word.

The launching discussion should last anywhere from about five to fifteen minutes and will take different forms depending on the phase and maturity of the group. Groups just starting out will rely more on get-to-know-you type of questions. For groups that have grown together for a while, it is best to use the launching discussion as a chance to hear updates from previously-discussed resolutions, life situations, or prayer suggestions. People need to know each other to grow in both human and spiritual friendship. Keep a balance of natural and spiritual questions.

General Check-in Questions

- Highs & lows: Share a blessing and a challenge since we last met.
- Grace sharing: Where did you experience God this week?

Seasonal Prompts

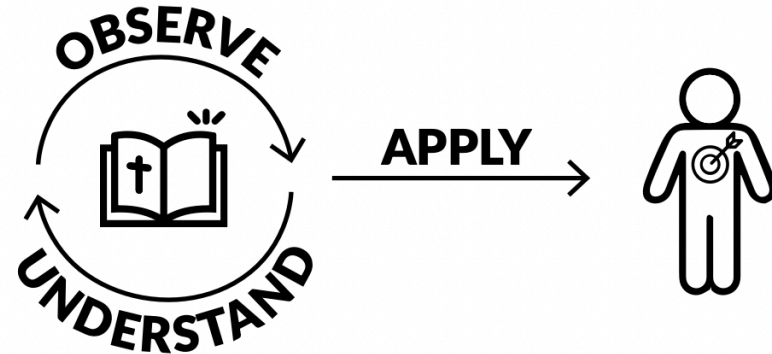
- What do you hope to get out of Lent this year?
- What were some favorite moments from your holiday season?

Prayer Check-in Questions

- Let's share our experiences from using last week's prayer suggestions.
- How did prayer go this week? Any blessings, insights, or struggles to share?

THREE BASIC TYPES OF QUESTIONS

There are three basic question types to note while preparing for a small group discussion: Observation, Understanding, and Application. These reflect the natural way we seek to apprehend truth of any kind, be it natural or supernatural.



Observation Questions

Observation questions ask what all reporters ask: "who, what, when, where, and why." We always find the answers to these questions in the biblical text. Observation questions allow the Holy Spirit to draw details to our attention that we may otherwise miss. Good reporters look for facts before drawing conclusions. Likewise, taking a close look at the text gives God space to speak to us based on what Scripture really says (not on what we think it says). Sometimes what is there surprises us!

Examples:

- What does Mary say to Jesus?
- How many times does the word "remain" appear here?
- To whom is Jesus addressing this parable?
- A general question to fall back on often opens up whatever

the Holy Spirit wants to show the group: “What details of this passage stand out to you?”

Understanding Questions

Understanding questions search for meaning—both the original meaning, and what the passage means for us or for an individual today. They help us ruminate over God’s word and seek to comprehend it. With understanding questions, answers will not be found directly in the text itself; they’ll require thought. Some understanding questions will be more objective in nature, others more subjective or speculative.

Examples:

- How might the cultural attitude towards tax collectors have sharpened the sting of Jesus’ words here?
- How do you imagine Jesus felt when the rich young man walked away?
- What is the significance, for you, of the metaphor Jesus uses here?

Experience Questions

This powerful type of understanding question draws on group members’ lives, using their own experience to identify with scriptural events and themes. Drawing out stories of people’s encounters with God often enhances the quality of the discussion and deepens connections within the group.

Examples:

- Have you ever done something crazy to get what you wanted? What motivated you? What went through your mind?
- What does it feel like to be ignored or be pushed to the side?
- When have you been confused by or struggled with one of Jesus’ teachings? What did you do?

Application Questions

Application questions are resolution-based, oriented to life change. They move conversation to its most practical level. This is where faith meets life, head meets heart, and heart drives us into action. These questions are conversion-oriented.

Examples:

- What, practically, does this mean for us?
- How might this discussion affect our lives this week?
- Do you see any practical applications here for you?
- This was a great discussion on Mary and Martha.
 - How does it challenge or encourage you to carve out time to “sit at the feet of Jesus?”
 - What might this look like in your life?

Application vs. Experience Questions

Many people confuse application and experience questions because they both ask group members to connect the Scriptures with their lives. In general, experience questions ask people to share *past* experiences. Sharing stories from their own lives helps group members relate to the events and people in the passage, and—just as important—prompts them to share with the group on a more personal level. Application questions typically ask people to take what they’ve learned from a passage and make a resolution that affects their life *going forward*. These prompt group members to turn inspiration into action. Use them to help the group encourage one another to grow, even keeping each other accountable in future sessions.

FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

Facilitation is interactive. The goal is to involve everyone in mutual intellectual and spiritual discovery. It's not a monologue or a dialogue but a group-a-logue! Use these facilitation techniques to improve the quality of discussion around life and God's word.



Careful Listening

It takes all our energy and attention to truly hear someone. Look at the person speaking. Focus on what they are saying. Try not to formulate a response while they are still speaking.



The Paraphrase

The paraphrase is a helpful tool for seeking whether you understood what was communicated. Use paraphrasing in the context of asking whether your re-phrasing is what the speaker meant.



Model Trust

Model trust by letting down your guard. It is important to be comfortable and facilitate the comfort of others. If you are relaxed, others will likely follow suit.



Seek Clarification

Communication can involve misunderstanding. Re-state what was said and ask the speaker if that is what they meant. If the speaker disagrees, ask them to clarify with different words.



Re-Direction

Often, the facilitator becomes the "answer person." Take the focus off yourself and avoid the role of "teacher" by directing the questions back to the group.



Reverence Each Person

Each person is a gift of God. We are a mystery, even to ourselves. Showing reverence for each person helps to create an environment of trust and good will between group members.



Start and End on Time

Show respect for your group members by setting and sticking to a start and end time. Help the group close the discussion if needed by asking for a final comment. Remember to leave time to pray together.

Navigate Group Behaviors

Use some of the strategies below to protect the group from the disruption of difficult behaviors or talk to the person privately if a behavior is persistent or needs more explicit intervention. Do so with love and gentleness, remembering how you would want to be treated. Do your best not to embarrass someone. Deal with difficult behaviors promptly to build trust and keep people looking forward to your group discussions.

Everyone has a tendency toward one or more difficult group behaviors. Be aware of your own tendency to dominate, hang in the background, or get defensive.

Dominating Darryl



"Thanks, Darryl; does anyone else have any thoughts?"

Perhaps afterwards, ask Darryl to help you encourage the quieter members.

Perhaps sit right next to Darryl.

Shy Sam



Perhaps sit directly across from Sam, ask him to read a Scripture aloud, or ask an observation question.

Try to understand why Sam isn't sharing. If he's just quiet, that's fine. If he's uncomfortable, find out more and address the issue.

Arguing Annie



"This is a question that has been debated for years. We are not going to answer this question tonight."

"Let's see what the *Catechism* has to say about this."

"Good discussion, but let's get back to the passage . . ."

Derailing Dawn

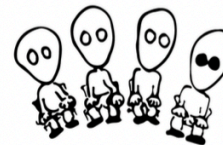


"Are we getting away from our topic a little?"

"To go back to the earlier question . . ."

"Anyone who wants to can talk about this over snacks after closing prayer!"

Quiet Group



"It might be good for everyone (if you're comfortable) to share how this affects you personally. Would you begin, Beth?"

"Let's pair up and share what we feel/think about what was just read."

Sensitive Sharing



"Thank you so much for sharing that with us. That can't have been easy. Can we pray for you right now?"

Be receptive, supportive, and good listeners. Resist giving advice unless the person asks for it. If appropriate, help the person get connected to a priest or counselor.

A PATH TO DEEPENING GROUP PRAYER

As the leader of your small group, help the group members grow in confidence praying together. Here is one progression that may help you deepen the time of closing group prayer gradually over a few weeks.

Say, Then Pray (Level 1): Before beginning the closing prayer in the sign of the cross, invite participants to say what they want to pray for conversationally. When all have shared, the small group facilitator prays aloud for things that were mentioned by group members.

Note Card Prayer (Level 2): Bring note cards to your small group. At closing prayer time, instruct everyone to write down two prayers. At least one of the two must be a prayer for something they need for themselves. The leader opens by praying for the things they wrote on the note card. Then group members do the same, perhaps going around the circle. The leader closes the prayer with a memorized prayer such as the Our Father or Glory Be. Continue this prayer by passing the note cards to the person on the left. Everyone takes their neighbor's note card home to continue praying for their needs throughout the week.

Note Card Pass (Level 3): Write on the note cards again, but this time, have participants pass the note to their neighbor before starting the prayer time. The small group leader opens in prayer and participants each pray for the intentions on their neighbor's note card. The small group leader closes the time of prayer and participants take home the note to continue praying for their neighbor throughout the week.

Circle Prayer (Level 4): Before opening in the sign of the cross, everyone conversationally expresses what they want prayer for. Each participant should listen especially closely to the person on their left. The small group leader opens the time of prayer by praying for the person on their left. The prayer continues clockwise around the circle, each person receiving prayer from the person on their right and then

praying for the needs of the person on their left extemporaneously in their own words.

Popcorn Prayer (Level 5): The small group leader opens a time of free-flowing prayer. You may preface the time of prayer with suggestions such as "Let's pray prayers of thanksgiving today," or "Everyone pray to God about something that moved you from today's conversation." Before making the sign of the cross, encourage everyone to jump in and pray out loud whenever there is a moment of silence. We call this "popcorn" prayer since prayers "pop" from around the group when different people are inspired to pray. Open the time of prayer and let group members pray for as long as you are able or there are prayers flowing. A good measure of when to end is when the group has been silent for the length of a "Hail Mary" said silently in your head!