

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

ACADEMY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

Small groups are at the center of our philosophy in the Academy of Christian Discipleship. As Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered . . ." The early church was a collection of household churches, Jesus formed a band of 12, and Paul traveled with a small group of fellow church planters. All were, in essence, small groups! Beyond the early church, most monasteries remained small, too. A medieval renewal movement, the Brethren of the Common Life, formed small groups, as well as the Wesleyan movement. Your group is in good company!

We need each other if we hope to grow as disciples, and we believe small groups are necessary as units of discipleship. On their own, there is nothing magical about them. Their success depends on what we do with them – how we gather, what our goals are, and how we achieve them. Our goal in the guide is to give you the tools to develop small groups that move members toward deep discipleship and deep relationship with one another.

TIPS FOR CHURCHES

Church leaders we work with tend to be nervous about developing and sustaining small groups. Major concerns center around recruiting qualified leaders and keeping a pulse on how groups are doing. We think the tips below address these concerns well, and our best advice is to take a hands-on approach. To achieve a specific purpose, group leaders need guidance. Here are a few guidelines to help:

1. **Decide how you want to recruit group leaders.** Many churches worry about having enough qualified leaders to begin small groups. We've seen churches deal with this in two ways:
 - a. Train on the job: Before groups begin, set up your leaders with some basic training (like what we've provided here), then gather with leaders periodically to troubleshoot.
 - b. Train up leaders first: Walk through the study material you plan to use with a small cohort first with the goal of deploying the members as small group leaders later.
2. **Gather periodically with small group leaders** to assess progress and share successes and difficulties. This is essential regardless of the way you select leaders.
3. **Make it easy for leaders to gather the content** they need (for example, make sure everyone has the links OCE provides to where the videos and study guides are hosted or send a weekly email with exactly what they need).
4. **Set clear expectations for your leaders.** It's natural for group leaders to have additional expectations placed on them to ensure a successful group gathering. What do you want them to do in and out of group meetings? Some churches ask leaders to set aside time to pray for the group, take time to preview videos or get a head start on spiritual exercises, prioritize time for building relationships, and cultivate a co-host or future group leader. Communicate these expectations clearly.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

Group leaders get to set the tone for small groups, but, thankfully, they don't need to be all-knowing! A leader's goal is to create a space of belonging and enough structure to keep everyone on track. Watch our "Guide to Small Groups" video facilitated by campus ministry associate Ron Pyle. It offers a number of helpful tips on how to set your group up for success (find it [here](#)). The tips below overlap with the video and offer bits of additional advice we've heard from churches over the years.

1. **Create clear expectations for your group members.** Set a schedule for meeting times and consider having members sign a covenant together that outlines group values. A few examples could be:
 - a. Consistency – members should make a serious effort to attend each group meeting
 - b. Confidentiality – members should maintain the trust of the group and not reveal what is shared by others
 - c. Prayer – members should regularly pray for the rest of the group

You can also allow the group to brainstorm the values that will help them feel safe and heard before asking everyone to sign.

2. **Have your meeting area set up when participants arrive.** Sitting in a circle in chairs helps discussion to move more easily and helps people feel like they belong. The homier and more comfortable the space, the more relaxed the group.
3. **Schedule a double start.** It often helps to have two start times, i.e., 6:30 to gather (greet, eat, settle in), 6:40 to begin.
4. **Start with prayer.** It is always a good idea to seek God's spirit and presence as you prepare to step into a time learning and vulnerability.
5. **Stick to the study materials for that week.** This keeps everyone on the same page, and stops certain members from being left out of the discussion.
6. **Admit your own ignorance.** As the leader it's okay to not have all the answers!
7. **Remember that silence is good.** Don't get anxious and fill every quiet moment. Give people time to process.
8. **Be sure to leave room for application and prayer.** Remember, the most important piece of your time together isn't just to have a good discussion. It could be helpful to assign a time keeper to make sure you have space to move beyond content and toward application.
9. **Try different methods of response** to draw out unique answers or quieter voices. For example: sit quietly with a passage of scripture, write out your responses, draw your response to what you are hearing, act out the main theme in silence.
10. **Take breaks!** It's okay to skip your study entirely one out of seven times and go grab coffee, play a game, or arrange a day for a picnic or progressive dinner. Activities that build relationships in the group are always worthwhile.

TIPS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Group members, how they engage with the material and how they engage with one another, can make or break a small group experience. Participants should always keep in mind the goals and values of the group and treat one another with respect and care. Your goal is to “do life” together and grow as individuals and a community in pursuit of radical apprenticeship to Jesus. Here are a few suggestions for how to create a space where that is possible:

1. **Affirm one another.** It is a big risk to volunteer your opinions, your heart, and your prayers.
2. **Be willing to wrestle with the material.** Encourage one another to keep digging. There is no need to settle for one answer. What else do you see? What do the rest think?
3. **Be specific.** Probe your fellow group members for specificity in language and experience. Ask questions like, why? What does that mean to you? How would you say that to your friend? What do you mean when you say the word “blessing” or “salvation,” or “Christ?”
4. **Keep a notebook.** Write down the group’s favorite verses, your discoveries, applications and prayers for future reference.
5. **Make space for other voices.** If you’re the talkative type, watch how long you talk to make sure everyone can participate.
6. **Focus on transformation.** A good discussion should never be the end of the story or the ultimate goal of your time together (though it is always a piece of the puzzle). Be sure to move toward application of the material and how it impacts your day-to-day living.