



Small Group Gathering Strategies

There are 4 “dials” you can turn up or down to influence how successful your small group gathering will be:

Dial #1: Accessibility

Turn this dial down as much as possible. Lower the barrier to entry as far as you can.

General:

- How easy is it to register for the group?
- How many channels of communication have you used to invite participation? (Remember that one-on-one invitation brings the highest chance of success.)
- Is this just for congregation members or are non-members invited? How have you equipped your members to recruit non-members?
- How will people get their materials for the gathering? (book, workbook, training or orientation if it's a service project)
- Is there a cost? Is there scholarship assistance available?
- What is the time commitment for participation? Best practice is an hour-long meeting once a week for 6-8 weeks, followed by a break and then an invitation to reengage
- What is the participating population in this group? How will you attend to different needs based on literacy, internet or technology access, physical or cognitive abilities?
- Are you providing different times/places/models for different ages and stages of life? Are you thinking about driving after dark for older members? Child care for younger members? During the workday vs. evening vs. weekend? If you want this group to be intergenerational, how can you attend to all of these elements?
- How are you attending to different learning styles?
- How are you attending to dynamics of race and gender?

In-person:

- How have you communicated the gathering location? What is the parking situation like and how have you prepared people for that? (particularly relevant for rotating between parishioners' homes)
- What is your inclement weather policy?
- Have you oriented people to the location of the restrooms or other facilities as they arrive?

Virtual:

- Is the zoom link set up well ahead of time and easily accessible?
- Do you have a tech troubleshooter identified ahead of time?

Dial #2: Atmosphere

Turn this dial up as high as possible. Place yourself in the shoes of a participant and ask how to make this meeting as warm, safe, and inviting as possible physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In-person:

- Have you arrived early enough to adjust the temperature in the room?
- What is the lighting? Strive for “bright enough to read materials and see each other clearly” balanced with “not so bright it feels like you’re in an operating room”
- What is the furniture like? Is it accessible and comfortable for all body types and abilities?
- Are you serving refreshments? Have you taken dietary restrictions into account? It’s helpful to have water at a bare minimum, and coffee/tea if possible

Virtual:

- Creating a warm, inviting atmosphere on zoom requires extra intention
- Invite participants to light a candle (having oriented them ahead of time they will need one!)
- If your church has a stash of unused prayer shawls, make sure each participant has one and invite them to use it during each gathering
- Create a “goody bag” with art supplies, a book or pamphlet, snacks, etc. and mail it to them or have them pick it up at church ahead of time
- Utilize music and/or art to open and close gatherings—YouTube videos of a favorite hymn to open and Bishop Deon or Bishop Curry offering a blessing to close are good options
- Discern ahead of time or with the group whether the sessions will be recorded. Recording can make the content accessible to those who cannot attend every session. Not recording can creating a safer environment for confidentiality and deep sharing.

Dial #3: Skills

Turn up this dial gradually throughout the course of the small group sessions. Support the leaders and participants in building their skills and they will be better equipped to go deep together.

- What norms will govern this group?
- What types of confidentiality are expected?
- What level of sharing, “fixing,” holding open-ended questions, etc., will the group commit to?
- Are you as the group leadership setting the norms, suggesting them, or letting the group self-generate the norms?
- Will any topics be deliberately set aside and *not* discussed?
- What training are you providing to group leaders ahead of time?
- What is the dynamic/balance between clergy and lay leadership? How will this affect the nature of the group?
- Will leadership rotate among the group or stay consistent?
- If members want to lead, will they need to do administration (set up zoom meetings, set up space, etc.)? Or primarily facilitation content/discussion? Both?
- Free-form discussion groups with no particular goal require a different skill set from groups that are designed to move from Point A to Point B

Dial #4: Content

Dial up your content by discerning carefully ahead of time and taking into account feedback as you go.

- How will the content for this group be chosen? By the clergy? By lay leaders?
- If it's a book, are there discussion questions already in the text? Will additional questions be generated by group leadership? Will members have access to those questions ahead of the meeting?
- What type of prep time is required for full participation in this group? How many hours a week will it take to read the book or watch the videos? Have you communicated that?
- Can people still participate fruitfully if they can't put in much outside prep time?
- To what extent can you adjust the content as you go? If people are finding two chapters of a book too much for one week, can you dial it back? If the program isn't working or people aren't finding it valuable, can you switch to another curriculum?

Next Steps

Many congregations get small group ministry going by starting with a book group or Christian Formation curriculum. What's next? How do you help people continue to go deeper in faith and begin to truly walk through life together? In a 6-8 week gathering, by session 4, invite the group to begin discerning what their next gathering might be. So perhaps after a week off, they regather for a 4 week service project ending in a fellowship opportunity, and then back to a book study, and then a Taize or Evening Prayer series, and begin to create a rhythm.

If you'd like additional help to build out your congregation's small group ministry, please be in touch with The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice, Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development at wrice@diocesemo.org. Happy ministry!