



SMALL GROUP GUIDE



The Mass wasn't invented to be the "front door" to Christianity. But your group of friends IS!

Friends. Listen.

God wants to break into your life and enter your heart in a new way. Small groups are an amazing way for Him to do that. They're an opportunity to gather in a smaller setting outside of Mass, and they give us an additional chance to get to know each other better and grow deeper in our faith. And in the end, they have the power to change lives! To change your life. And to change the lives of people you invite who may be on the fence with their faith. Small groups come in all shapes and sizes - men's groups, women's groups, married groups, single groups, moms groups, hiking groups, groups by location, or, really, anything else you can dream up. You don't have to be a theologian, priest, or even a teacher to create authentic and meaningful conversations. God uses all of us when we're willing! I urge you to have the courage and humility to host - or join - your own small group.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Chris Stefanick'.

Chris Stefanick

Why Small Groups? Because we're created for relationships!

The truth is, life isn't meant to be lived alone. It is meant to be lived with, and for, others. In fact, Jesus often likened his community to a family. As we work toward becoming more Christ-like people, we need deep relationships to help us apply and live out gospel truths. As we share with each other what we're learning, we grow together.

Small groups are not just beneficial, they're biblical. From Moses (Exodus 18:13-26), to the Apostles (Acts 2:42), meeting together in small groups encourages one another in the faith (Hebrews 10:25).

Small groups are a classroom for learning how to love like Jesus did - to become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did. It's a life pursuit. And as the family of God, we need to take time in the ordinary rhythm of life to be in regular contact with ordinary, imperfect believers so can we learn real fellowship and experience the connection God intends for us.

While no family is perfect, a small group is a place where we can figure out how to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what He did.

"The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."
(1 John 3:16)



Starting a Small Group is as simple as 1-2-3!

Be stubbornly simple. Nothing kills an initiative like complexity.

- 1 Personally invite a few friends to join your group.** Text them, send out an email, make a phone call, create a post on social media, or print a good old fashioned invitation.
- 2 Decide when and where you want to meet.** A home, a coffee shop, a park, or even a video conference...any place where people can gather for conversation. We recommend meeting at least monthly. Twice-per-month or even weekly is great!
- 3 Keep it simple.** If the Holy Spirit is leading you to host your own study and discussion of some material, great! And of course, also feel free to follow the prayer and reflection points provided in our small group resources. But don't forget the incredibly powerful way friends have always helped one another grow in the faith by simply asking: "How ARE you?" and "How is your prayer/spiritual life going?" And then, really listening!

The Cheetos Principle to Invitation

STEP 1: Go to the grocery store and buy some Spicy Cheetos.

STEP 2: Call a friend/neighbor/co-worker and say: "Hey. I've got some Spicy Cheetos. You should come over and have some with me."...don't worry, they'll come, because...Spicy Cheetos!

STEP 3: Eat some Spicy Cheetos (be sure to share some with your friend/neighbor/co-worker), and then - at some point - say, "Hey brother/sister, not only are these Spicy Cheetos really good; but, how ARE you? As in, really...how're you doing?"

STEP 4: Listen - really listen - and love on your friend.

STEP 5: Then DO the small group program! We've written it for you!

If you have two friends, you can start a group (Matthew 18:20). You don't need training. There are no formal requirements. You just need to lean into a certain generosity of spirit, and to have a heart for others.

Fears Around Starting, Hosting or Joining a Small Group

- **My house isn't clean enough...**neither are the homes of your friends, believe me.
- **I don't have the right gifts...**share the responsibilities, talk to a few friends and work together to share the load.
- **What if no one says yes?...**Keep asking, they might be overwhelmed with life. Ask if there is something you can do to make life easier.
- **I don't know how to manage conversations...**You don't need to! Who wants a "managed" conversation anyway? God desires us to be real with one another: He'll equip you...if you let Him.
- **I don't know enough...**Who does? It's OK not to know. Your role isn't to provide answers, to educate, or even to furnish information...answers to questions can always be looked up. While no question is off-limits, your role is better understood as someone who wants to help facilitate faith-filled conversations. Trust God enough to let Him guide the conversation.
- **I don't live like others in my parish...**People didn't all live the same in the early Church. When we love each other, we don't judge each other by the size or style of our homes. St. Paul tells us that he learned the secret of being hungry and well-fed. We too can learn to live according to our circumstances with humility (Phil 4:12)!

Creating the Experience

Room Setup

Everything in your room communicates a tone and feeling. Try to arrange things so people feel comfortable, and are able to look at one another face-to-face when talking. Food and something to drink are always welcome. We suggest re-discovering the joys of a potluck!

The more you can make a room feel like home for someone else, the more comfortable your group will be and the more likely others will feel happy there.

How to Be...and Behave

One of the primary reasons a person wants to engage in a small group discussion is to be heard...and that means meaningful conversation. So try to be mindful of that. Here are some ways to help:

1. **When you get started, open each session with getting a sense from others about how they're really doing.** Check in with them. Greet people at the door with a smile to set the tone right away. Be friendly and be yourself...you have permission!
2. **Don't do all the talking...help facilitate the conversation rather than dominate it.** Cast a vision for a conversation, don't kill it. Your role isn't to educate or furnish information. That is talking to people. Strive to talk with them instead. Give them the space to be heard. Consider writing down things you want to share on your own paper and holding the thought. Give conversation...time.
3. **Be comfortable with silence and uncertainty.** Meaningful conversations require some level of silence: it's where thought often occurs (not everyone is an exterior processor of their thoughts), and it's the space in which the thunder of God's still, small voice of hope is very often heard (1 Kings 19 1-18).
4. **Be a good listener.** A good listener is quick to listen (James 1:19). A good listener is an active listener. A good listener listens with his or her eyes as well ears. "If you love to listen, you will receive; and if you pay attention, you will be wise" (Sirach 6:33).
5. **Encourage everyone to be involved in the conversation** by listening well and involving others (but don't insist everyone must speak!). If your group is too big for everyone to be involved in the conversation, break it up into multiple groups. And let people wander between groups as their interests dictate.
6. **Don't rush!** The point is not to get through any certain volume of material. The point is to take the time together to let God reveal the purpose of a conversation (which very often results in people finding their life's purpose in His plan).
7. **Pray.** Pray before anyone arrives so you can welcome them well. Pray before anyone leaves so you leave in His presence. And pray between meetings for one another's intentions. Prayer is not the place to hold back.

Remember—you don't need to have all the answers to host this study. Hosting is about helping others have helpful conversations about faith. If that happens, it's a win!



Have a Communication Plan

Help people continue the experience by checking-in with the people in your group throughout the time between when you get together.

1. Send a text message to everyone in your group. Let them know you're praying for them. Just because.
2. Send a text message to anyone who couldn't make it. Let them know you missed them! And let them know you look forward to seeing them next time.
3. Send a text to at least one person in your group and ask them what you can pray about for them.
4. Post a message on your social media page. Post a message on their social media page. Let folks know how much you enjoy their company! And how much you look forward to spending more time with them.
5. Email your group every week (if you meet weekly), with a reminder of when your small group is next meeting, and where, and any other information they may need (e.g., "You all bring something else to eat, I've got the Spicy Cheetos!").

A Note on the Importance of Small Group Relationships

We don't think we can say it better than Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas did in their book *Activate*:

Most of the people...are looking for social relationships. They want to meet casual friends. They are looking for some people to hang out with, because they know instinctively that within that group of people they're likely to meet someone they want to get personal with and invite into their inner circle. Then, from that inner circle, they can decide who they want to be in intimate relationship with. Instead of being forced into contrived familiarity, they just want to be given an opportunity to connect with new people so that deeper relationships can develop naturally.

Allow casual friendships to develop without feeling a need to force intimacy.

Most (parish) leaders have made two critical mistakes in trying to help people connect. First, we have undersold the importance of basic friendships and social relationships to overall spiritual health. Second, we have oversold the importance of personal and intimate relationships—and we have tried to force our small group members into such relationships, even though groups are naturally structured to accommodate social, not personal or intimate, connections. People simply do not get personal or intimate in groups of eight to fifteen people. They socialize in groups of eight to fifteen people. When we try to force more intimate relationships in our groups, we scare and alienate many potential group members, especially men. No man is going to sign up for a group if he thinks he is going to have to let people he doesn't know that well into his personal business. But men (and women) will sign up for groups where they can meet new friends, connect with God, and hang out socially.

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