Small Group Dynamics

THE SMALL GROUP MODEL
To be a disciple of Jesus means to serve as Jesus served. How did He do it? By forming a group of disciples, teaching and journeying with them, and then sending them out into the world to create their own disciples.²

This is where small group or community group ministry comes in. Smaller groups allow believers to connect with others seeking to grow deeper in their relationship with Christ and His Church. People encouraging each other in their pursuit of Christ mirrors the Proverb, which tells us, “Men sharpen each other…as iron sharpens iron.”³ In small groups, participants find a network of believers to support, challenge, rejoice with, mourn with, to learn with, to serve with, to pray with and for, to hold accountable, and to bring new people to Christ with. It helps to live out our baptismal vocation as missionary disciples.

We are called to love as Christ loved us.⁴ His love for the people of the world was not only revealed on the cross, but also the years leading up that moment when He was performing His ministry. He visited homes, healed the sick, raised the dead, and challenged the status quo. He also did all of it with a small group of disciples, teaching them and empowering them to go seek out disciples of their own: The first community groups.

TEACHING LIKE THE MASTER
Let’s take a moment to learn alongside the disciples at the feet of Jesus. His wisdom and example can teach us how to be an effective small group leader.⁵

The Power of Storytelling
Jesus frequently used parables and relatable examples to reach those who would listen.⁶ The lessons and truths contained in them are far greater than any knowledge one gains by classroom memorization. We are not Christians simply because we can recite theology; we are Christians because we live the teachings of Jesus. Stories are powerful and have a great capacity to convert hearts. Your story is important and matters. Don’t be afraid to share from your life. Take the time to find real life examples to apply to the teachings each week. Practice the art of good storytelling.

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¹ Adapted from “STAY Catholics Core Team Field Manual 2018-2019” p.8-11 Meagan Barras & St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, Dallas, TX
² Matthew 28:16-20
³ Proverbs 27:17
⁴ John 13:34
⁵ Luke 6:40
⁶ Matthew 13:10
**Know Your Audience**

Another reason Jesus used parables were because of how relevant the examples were to the experiences of his audience. St. Paul used this method in his missionary journeys.\(^7\) Consider this your challenge to stay up on the current trends in youth culture. Your primary resource will be the young people in your small group. What are their interests? What is news in their world? What is their view of today’s reality?

**The Questions (and Answers) of Jesus**

As a wise teacher whose methods would make both Rabbis and Socrates proud, Jesus asked far more questions than he ever answered. Depending on your sources, in the Gospels Jesus asks about 307 Questions and only directly answers between 3-8 of the 183 questions he is asked. A good teacher helps a student arrive at the answer themselves -- an approach that leads to integrated learning and mastery. Jesus’ response to those with questions challenged them to look deep within themselves, examine their whole being, and respond in faith to the God who is after their heart.\(^8\)

**Pray like Jesus**

You may have missed in the Gospels how often Jesus stepped away to pray in solitude.\(^9\) Especially as leaders, we must tend to our own spiritual wellbeing. We must be people who are taking care of ourselves and allowing God to care for us; we can only share the goodness we receive. As leaders following Jesus, we too will teach others to pray,\(^10\) lead prayer with others,\(^11\) and pray for others in person.\(^12\)

**MANAGING YOUR SMALL GROUP**

*Set the ground rules early*

As much as young people may act to the contrary, they love order and boundaries. Set the expectations in the first meeting and reiterate them as often as you need to. This will help the small group see you and your co-leader as the leaders. This tip is especially helpful with junior high ministry. It is possible to go from being seen as a disciplinarian to a more easy-going leader, it is much more difficult to go from being perceived as a push-over to a take charge leader.

*More listening than teaching and sharing*

Remember the principles and methods of good teaching. We love our Catholic faith and our Church, which is probably why we are serving. As important as it is to share our knowledge and enthusiasm to our young disciples, we have to make sure to give them enough space to journey with their peers in conversation, ask tough questions, and come to important faith

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\(^7\) Acts 17:22-34; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

\(^8\) CCC, 27

\(^9\) Mark 1:35; Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12

\(^10\) Luke 11:1-4

\(^11\) Matthew 26:26-30

\(^12\) John 17; Luke 22:32
decisions in their own way. A goal every week will be for you to be the person who has said the least during small group discussion.

Ask open ended questions

These are the type of questions that require a thoughtful, sentence long response. What was your favorite memory from last year and what made it so special? Closed questions can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” are to be avoided if we want to invite in-depth sharing and discussion within our small groups.

Affirm your small group

Use every opportunity to infuse positivity and goodness into your group. Affirm everyone for sharing and participating, and reinforce good behavior and demonstrations of virtue and character.

Do not fear the silence

Silence is common in discussion groups, and we frequently mismanage it. A good amount of silence is not a bad thing; especially for the introverts and deep thinkers in your group, they will value that time to process the questions before them. The biggest challenge as a leader will be to resist the urge to break awkward silence every time you encounter it.

Small Group Standards for EDGE:

- Everyone sits on the same level (sitting in a chair, sitting on the floor, laying down, etc.)
- Everyone sits in a circle
- No cell phones
- No gossiping about school, church, or other friends
- No side conversations
- No interrupting when someone is talking
- No disrespecting your small group leaders
- Things shared in small group are not to be shared with others (unless it is a safety concern)

“You have never heard of a sad or gloomy-faced saint... That would be a contradiction... [The heart of a Christian is] full of peace, because he knows to place his joy in the Lord, even in life's difficult moments.” – Pope Francis

It will not always be easy, or fun. But serving as a small group leader is one of those experiences in the Church that will stay with you for the rest of your life. 90% of being a successful small group leader is showing up and heeding the words of our Holy Father. Be there. Be joyful.
20 Keys to Leading a Crummy Small Group

1. Only interact with your kids during Small Group times, anything beyond that might be awkward or just take up too much of your time.
2. Don't pray for your Small Group, their parents probably already do that.
3. At all costs make sure they like you. After all, you are here to re-live your teenage years and make friends that you never had at that age.
4. Never say specific words of encouragement to a kid in front of other people or write notes to them or their parents. You don’t want to embarrass them.
5. Never confront or challenge a kid because they may drop out of your group.
6. Don't keep kids and their parents informed each week about what you are talking about or if you are meeting elsewhere, they should be able to network with each other.
7. Stand at the back of the room during large group time so the kids can just interact with each other without "the man" watching their every move.
8. So you don't cut into too much of your personal time, limit your small group prep each week to the time you have in the car on the way over.
9. Let any subject that comes up during small group discussion be fair game. These kids have a sixth sense about what they need to learn and you should trust it.
10. Read straight from the curriculum and don't use any of your boring, personal examples.
11. Always say something right away to fill uncomfortable silent moments after you ask a question and nobody speaks up. Just answer your own question and move on.
12. If a kid gives a wrong answer or expresses some bad theology, make sure you either immediately change the subject to cover up or just have a good laugh at their expense.
13. Kids like routine. Never try anything creative or different during your Small Group time.
14. Make sure kids don't participate in leading the group. They may try to take over.
15. Kids should already know what your expectations are for their behavior during small group, don't ever tell them.
16. Let the length of your discussion be determined by your most ADHD kid's attention span.
17. Never REQUEST that a student stop disrupting small group discussion. Never RELOCATE that student to a different spot in the room. And never involve the St. Matthew staff if a student just won't participate appropriately in small group time.
18. End your Small Group 10 minutes late so parents waiting outside think you're really holy.
19. If a question comes up that is hard for you to answer, just make something up and end by nodding and saying "God is good all the time".
20. When issues come up, don't connect with St. Matthew Staff. What do they know?

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13 Adapted from Watermark Student Ministries 2015-2016 Small Group Leader Handbook, pg. 7