

Starting a New Community Group

New community groups can often grow and multiply because the participants gather with more openness than existing small groups. An “open house” is a particularly good way to meet and break the ice with each other before the first session of a group study. The group can also discuss who else to invite as the study begins. Discuss what each participant can expect from the group, and start off the right way by praying briefly for each other.

In the Gospels, especially in Matthew and Luke, food around a table with teaching is often part of the mix when the disciples and seekers are learning together and growing spiritually. So when launching a new community group, tasty desserts or a basic meal will help to stimulate the joy of doing life together.

At the open house, ask participants to introduce themselves and share how or why they are present in this group. Here is another activity you can try to get folks talking.

Have each group member write an amazing, unique, or unusual (but unknown) fact about themselves on an index card. Collect the cards, and then pass out paper and have people write each member’s name with a blank space next to it. As you read each of the cards aloud, have group members use their lists to record their guesses about whom each fact belongs to. See who can correctly match the most facts with the names. The value of this exercise is in the conversations that will arise as people ask for explanations of the things they discover about each other.

Review the Community Group Covenant, providing opportunity for the group to ask questions and shape it as necessary. Talk about each person’s expectations and priorities.

Finally, place an empty seat or two in the middle of your group and encourage the group participants to think about a person who could fill that chair or seat over the next few weeks. Make a plan for how to invite those folks to join you. Perhaps you could provide postcards for the participants to send as an invitation. If your group grows too large for one room, split it into two rooms for discussion, then rejoin at the end of the weekly session to pray together and invite each group member to share what they appreciated about the meeting.

While a kick-off meeting might be skipped by an established or experienced small group, any group will experience awakening and renewal by focusing on the purposes of an outwardly focused community group.

Tips for Hosting a Community Group

1. Preparation

- a. Pray for your group. All group members are people arriving at different stages from different experiences with different insights, none of which is the facilitators' job to evaluate. Pray for God to work in the lives of everyone in your group.
- b. Review the session outline. Even though the sessions are designed to be simple to lead, take time to preview them and read through the questions. Make note of the questions you feel are most important so that you definitely get to those.
- c. Check out your meeting space. Before your group is scheduled to meet, make sure the meeting environment is ready. Have enough chairs? Lighting adequate? Have all the supplies you need?

2. In the classroom (or living room)

- a. Welcome everyone. Make an effort to personally welcome and greet each person as they arrive.
- b. Silence cell phones. Plan to keep interruptions to a minimum. At the start of each session lesson ask people to turn off or silence cell phones.
- c. Always start on time and end on time. Regardless of where you are in the lesson, when the clock rolls around to the "decided" ending time, call time and give group members the opportunity to leave if they need to. Then wrap up as quickly as you can. This communicates that you value and respect people's time.
- d. Give everyone a voice. Don't hesitate to break into smaller groups to discuss some of the questions. This encourages greater participation by everyone—especially those uncomfortable in a large group setting. We want everyone to have a voice.
- e. Encourage "safe" participation. While you want everyone to participate, however be careful not to put anyone on the spot. Let the group members know upfront that they don't have to answer questions they're uncomfortable answering. It's ok for someone to respond with "I'll pass for now."
- f. After session conversations. Be prepared for people who want to hang out and talk at the end. If you need people to leave by a certain time, make this clear during the meeting. Be aware of childcare pickup times.
- g. Thank people for coming and let them know you're looking forward to seeing them next time.

3. Host Conversation Leading Tips

- a. Enjoy the process. Enjoy learning and growing with your group. Share with your group what you are learning.
- b. The ratio of host talk time to group members talk time is ideally 20% / 80%. Be careful to allow time for all group members to speak. Silence is okay. It's okay to wait a minute or so for someone to answer. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "what do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.
- c. You (or anyone) are not expected to be the expert. None of us have all the answers . . . seek together. A host is not a lecturer, sage, answer giver, or an expert. Allow the Holy Spirit to be "in charge".
- d. Be neutral. Try not to interrupt, judge, or minimize comments/input. Don't begin with preconceived expectations.
- e. Silence is okay ☺ It's okay to wait even a couple of minutes for someone to answer. You don't need to answer something yourself if no one speaks up right away.

- f. Keep on track. Encourage good on-topic conversation, but don't be timid about calling time on a given question and moving on. Part of your role is clock management. If the group decides to spend extra time on a given question or activity, consider skipping or spending less time on a later question or activity in order to stay on schedule.
- g. Building "Group Trust" takes time. While you want to do the best job you can to host, avoid setting unrealistic expectations for how quickly the group will "gel" or "bond." Take what levels of trust and vulnerability the group offers and build from there.
- h. Not everyone wants to talk...that's okay. Give people freedom to participate as they feel comfortable.
- i. Encourage others to lead in prayer. Remember, for many people it takes time before they feel comfortable praying out loud. We try to provide written prayers if people prefer to use those rather than feeling like they need to come up with something in the moment.
- j. Encourage participation, but be careful not to put people on the spot. Some people are very comfortable sharing, others are not. Ask people to offer answers, testimonies, stories as they are comfortable. Invitation is always better than putting someone on the spot.
- k. Invite group members to read scripture aloud in your sessions.
- l. Have fun! This is about sharing life together as we all grow in our love of God and others.