

# Founding Parish Small Group Ministry

*"Small groups help the faithful to live as believing, praying, and loving communities like the early Christians (cf. Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35)."*

*- Pope St. John Paul II -*

## Vision for parish small group ministry

Pope Saint John Paul II urged pastors "to devise new and effective ways of shepherding the faithful". Specifically, he highlighted small groups as a vital means of living out the Church's vision of a missionary community. He said that these groups had the potential to richly "deepen communion and participation in parishes and dioceses" and serve as "a genuine force for evangelization."

While the potential is extraordinary, there can be a wide spectrum of fruitfulness depending on how small group ministry is implemented. Intentionality and accountability is what aligns these groups with the mission of making disciples.

With that in mind we encourage parishes to be thoughtful and patient in the process of beginning this ministry.

Experience has shown that one of the most vital aspects is someone shepherding the ministry's leaders in an ongoing way. In a Catholic context shepherding is not a generic idea. It is very clearly laid out in the Church's structure: the Bishop is the shepherd of the diocese. He appoints local pastors to shepherd the parishes under him. That pastor then delegates aspects of that ministry to others. Thus, we strongly encourage that our pastors be involved in designing the leadership of this ministry in their parishes.

## Steps to begin Small Groups

- 1 If the pastor is not able to lead this ministry himself (as will normally be the case), he will need to pick someone to serve as the point person to shepherd this ministry in an ongoing way. It is essential that this person meets the FACT criteria below and receives training through Lisa Brenninkmeyer's free course on [reviveparishes.com](https://reviveparishes.com) so that he or she can effectively guide the small group leaders.
- 2 The point person identifies suitable candidates to serve as small group leaders. These candidates should have the following traits (**FACT**):

**Faithful:** Regular sacramental life, faithfulness to Church teaching, dedicated to prayer

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**Available:** Enough space in their life to commit to preparing well, leading gatherings, and communicating with the group

**Charismatic:** Genuinely interested in others, socially warm, basic leadership skills, and interpersonal skills

**Teachable:** Openness to receiving direction, training, mentorship and accountability

Please note: this person does not have to be particularly well formed; in fact, if they are relatively close in faith maturity to the peers they are leading they are more likely to establish trust and relationship quickly.

This step should happen at least a month prior to the launch of your small groups. Also, it is important to discern more individuals to invite to be leaders than you will actually need. That will give you and them the freedom to acknowledge if they are not available or interested in this ministry's mission and vision

- 3 Reach out to these individuals one on one and invite them into this role telling them why you think that this could be a good opportunity to use their gifts and talents. Be sure to set very clear expectations. For example,

"This group will have X many members, meet once a week, from Oct 22 to Nov 26, with the option to continue on to another study following."

Ask for a commitment by a specific date.

- 4 Train leaders using specific parts of Lisa Brenninkmeyer's free course on [reviveparishes.com](http://reviveparishes.com).

- 5 Advertise the upcoming study in the bulletin, in signage, on parish social media, in email blasts, and integrated into the clergy's preaching (if applicable). Be sure to make clear:

- What is this study on?
- Who is it for? Both demographically (age, sex, state in life, etc.) but also in terms of faith maturity (seeking, new to the faith, very devoted, etc.)
- When and where will it meet? (Be sure to offer times and locations that work for the demographics the parish is hoping to serve)
- How often will it meet?
- How will groups be put together?
- Who will be leading them?
- Most importantly, *what is the specific fruit the parish is seeking and how does this connect to other aspects of parish discipleship?*

- 6 Open parish wide registration for a designated period of time. Use QR codes and links on your website to do registration online. Be sure to also have lower-tech options for those who need them.
- 7 Assemble groups based on natural relationships with your leaders. If appropriate, bring leaders into this process. Place people in groups where they will experience relationships readily. For example:
  - Empty nester men and women together
  - Dads of school age-children
  - Moms of school age-children
  - Young adults (divide by sex if there are enough)
  - Knights of Columbus guys
  - Council of Catholic Women gals
- 8 Have a designated shepherd that checks in with small group leaders weekly via phone or in person to support, guide and hold the small group leader accountable.
- 9 Have a clearly defined next step to invite participants into following this study. Parishes could do:
  - An Advent Study, for example [Fr. Mark Touns](#)
  - [Emmaus 90](#)
  - [Foundations for Discipleship](#)
- 10 Get feedback from small group leaders afterward! Specifically: were the fruits you were hoping to see achieved and were you leaders adequately supported?

### Frequently asked questions

- *If my parish is only going to have one group, is it best for Father to be the leader?*

Priests and deacons can be very effective small group leaders. If they have not been trained in leading small groups in the past, training would be very important for them. One thing that could be challenging for clergy is that small groups are not designed to be a place of catechesis, so much as a place of mutual accompaniment.

- *When and where should our groups meet?*

Think about the various demographics that you are hoping to provide small groups for. Plan times and locations that those individuals will be available and interested in meeting. For example: seniors will prefer meeting during the day and will largely be open to meeting at the parish; working parents may prefer to meet in a home will need to meet either in early morning or perhaps after bedtime for small children.

- *Should small groups be co-ed or single sex?*

Single sex small groups are ideal for more vulnerable sharing and conversation. However, if small groups are a brand new concept in your parish, couples may prefer doing small group together to start.