



NEW GROUP LEADER MATERIALS

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Why Small Groups at ACF?

What is a small group?

God's love is made complete in us when we learn to follow Christ with others. In a world where you're trying to grow spiritually, environment is everything. We can't grow in a vacuum. Just as Jesus got close with His disciples, we must get close to others in order to grow. At Austin Christian Fellowship (ACF), we believe the best way to follow Christ with others is through small groups. ACF groups are small gatherings, generally 4-14 people, pursuing life transformation in community. Groups are mixed gender, life stage, married or single, or gender-specific in composition. All are **intentional relationships** striving to imitate the way the early disciples invested in each other's lives.

What are the benefits of following Christ with others?

1. Following Christ with others helps us to navigate life's hardships together.
"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" ~ Ecclesiastes 4:9-10
2. Following Christ with others keeps us accountable to each other.
"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." ~ Proverbs 27:17
3. When you follow Christ with others, you invite the presence of God.
"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." ~ Matthew 18:20

Scripture is really clear on the need for community! There are lots of examples throughout the New Testament about the importance of living out our faith in the context of others. We're told to:

- Love one another and be kind & compassionate to one another (John 13:34; Ephesians 4:32)
- Be devoted to & honor one another (Romans 12:10)
- Build up & encourage one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)
- Teach one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Accept one another (Romans 5:17)
- Serve one another & use spiritual gifts for the benefit of one another (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10)
- Forgive & bear with one another (Ephesians 4:2, 32; Colossians 3:13)
- Be patient with one another (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13)
- Comfort one another & bear one another's burdens (1 Thessalonians 4:18; Galatians 6:2)
- Confess to & pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- Stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24)
- Look to the interests of one another (Philippians 2:4)

At ACF, being part of a small group is the best way we know of to practice these "one another's" with one another!

Group Covenant: Small Group Purpose, Values and Goals

Purpose

ACFgroups' grow relationships that inspire knowing, loving and serving Jesus Christ.

Group members agree to the following values & goals:

Commitment

We give priority to the group meeting and will call or email if we will be late or absent.

Authenticity

We strive for open, honest relationships that are gentle and gracious. We are a safe place where people are heard, valued and respected. We share what God is doing in our lives, our trials and victories. When we allow ourselves to be open and honest with one another, we open the door for God to work in our group.

Mutual Accountability

We will help one another pursue lives that are spiritually healthy and pleasing to God. To model appropriate respect for the study of scripture and to defer to anyone who may struggle, we will refrain from consuming alcohol during group meetings.

Confidentiality

Everything that is shared is kept strictly confidential within the group, and we avoid sharing improper information about those outside the group.

Others-Centered

We are not just takers but givers of life. We grow spiritually by others-centered thinking and serve others with our God-given gifts.

Inviting

We keep an open chair and share Jesus's command of finding a shepherd for every sheep by inviting newcomers.

Shared Ownership

Every member of the group is a minister and will assume a role or responsibility within the small group over time.

Discipleship

We will each invest in one or two others whom we can support more diligently and help grow into committed disciples who, in turn, will make other disciples.

Every new group should discuss their purpose and values together so that members are in agreement. For existing groups, it's helpful to review the covenant annually and every time a new member joins.

Leading a Small Group

Steps for Starting a Group:

1. **Begin to pray** for your group and for God to prepare the hearts of those that will be in your group.
2. **Decide** on the day, time, frequency and location for your group meeting and email groups@acfellowship.org with those details. As people reach out to us looking for a group, this helps us connect them with you.
3. **Invite** family and friends to join you! Who is in your sphere of influence that is not in a group? Consider inviting your neighbors, adults you meet from your kids' sports teams, co-workers, parents from school, work-out friends at the gym, those you've met through your hobbies, etc. Note: A personal invitation always get better results than an email!
4. **Contact** all of your group participants a few weeks before you start to provide details on your group meetings. Let them know what to expect for the first meeting, if they need to bring anything, and where you're meeting or how to login if meeting online. Sending an email or text reminder a day or two before each meeting is always helpful too!

If you're leading a group for the first time, remember:

- Sweaty palms are a healthy sign.
- Seek support. We are here to help you! Email us at groups@acfellowship.org.
- Be yourself! Embrace who you are and how God wants you to uniquely lead the study.
- Prepare for the group time. Go through the lesson or material to discuss before the meeting to familiarize yourself with the material. Pray for your group time and ask the Holy Spirit to guide the discussion.
- Share leadership. Ask other members of the group to facilitate discussion or share in other responsibilities for the group. Groups are healthiest when every member is engaged and invested.

Typical flow for a group meeting – adjust schedule based on length of your meeting:

- 15 minutes: Social/check-in time
- 60 minutes: Discussion
- 15 minutes: Prayer

Tips for leading an engaging group discussion:

- Create open and meaningful conversation (not a class!) where everyone brings thoughts and questions to the table.
- Encourage others to share, listen attentively when they speak and be affirming whenever you can.
- Ask questions that:
 - are open-ended (not yes or no)
 - evoke feelings, thoughts, insights
 - do not have just one right answer
 - require personal examples
 - stimulate people to apply what they are learning
- People are messy! Don't try to control what you can't control.
- Remember, God causes the growth. Your job is to care, listen, pray, and model searching scripture for truth.

Care in an Emotional Crisis

When approached by a person in your group experiencing a crisis:

- Be authentic.
- Take a deep breath with them and ask if you can pray with them.
- Listen with compassion, not judgement. Listening is your most important tool when caring for someone who is hurting.
- Seek to understand their perception of the situation, not your own.
- Avoid platitudes and minimizing. Allow them to feel what they feel.
- Ask open-ended questions: What do you need right now? What would help you feel safe? What can I do for you? Who is with you right now? (If speaking by phone.)
- Create an environment of emotional safety.
- Be respectful, not controlling.
- Do not pry. Keep your motives in check.
- Express your desire to keep confidentiality. Request permission to share if you need to reach out to a pastor or our groups team for support.
- If you are aware of their support team, find out who might be available to help them.
- When offering resources such as a counseling referral list, encourage them to be empowered to act on their own. Email us at groups@acfellowship.org to have us send you the current counseling referral list that you can share.
- End your time with prayer.

Ministering with God's Word:

Sharing God's Word when ministering to someone who is hurting is powerful. Many of the psalms are written as a lament, expressing the fears and grief of the writer. Sharing some of the psalms can give a hurting person the language needed to entrust God with their sorrow. Some examples:

Abortion: Psalm 139:13

Anxiety: 1 Peter 5:7

Anger: Proverbs 29:11

Death: 1 Corinthians 15:55

Depression: Psalm 62:5

Finances: Matthew 6:25

Forgiveness: Ephesians 4:32

Infertility: Isaiah 26:3, 55:8; Habakkuk 3:17

Loneliness: James 4:8

Self-esteem: 2 Corinthians 3:18

Sickness: Psalm 6:2

Tiredness: Isaiah 40:29

A note about the importance of professionals and referrals:

- Following up and checking in on individuals via text or email can go a long way to let them know they are not alone and you care about them.
- Ask for help from other group members with checking in, especially those with the gifts of exhortation and mercy.
- While we all are ministers of care and reconciliation (i.e., we can show compassion, mercy, kindness), know your own limitations.
- **Unless you are a trained professional counselor, you are not qualified or equipped to offer counseling.**
- Recognize when professional help is needed and offer a referral. For tips on recognizing this need, email us at groups@acfellowship.org.

Choose a Study for Your Group

What should your group study/discuss next? Reading and studying the Word as a group can take on a lot of different forms throughout the year and can even vary based on current life stage.

Ideas for reading and studying the Word:

- **Sermon-based discussion** – Group members attend/listen to the weekend message and then discuss the teaching, scripture and application points. No “homework” during the week.
- **Scripture-based discussion** – Group members read a passage of scripture together and then apply a study method, such as “SOAP,” to discuss the passage. (SOAP stands for **S**cripture, **O**bservation, **A**pplication and **P**rayer.) Go through a book of the Bible together, slowly going through a chapter at a time. No “homework” during the week.
- **Read a book of the Bible & discuss** – Group members read through a pre-determined section of the Bible on their own during the week, journaling and taking notes as they read. Each person brings their insights and questions to the group for discussion each week and talk together about life application. Add in resources from The Bible Project as well as online study tools and commentaries to deepen the study.
- **Bible study curriculum** – Select a published study curriculum for the group to use. Curriculum is available for books of the Bible as well as topical studies and is available in print, video, and through various phone apps. Most Bible study curriculum will have some form of “homework” during the week. Some studies that are video based only require watching the video together before group discussion. (i.e., no “homework”).
 - Choosing a study from the plethora of options out there can be overwhelming! Reach out to the Groups team for help narrowing things down at groups@acfellowship.org.
 - **See the list of Free Resources for Bible Study Curriculum.**
 - If you need help purchasing videos/DVDs for a Bible study, the Groups team can buy them for you.
 - Group members can buy their own study booklets (if applicable) or ACFgroups can place a group order to be reimbursed when monies are collected.

Free Resources for Bible Study Curriculum

View ACF's small group library - www.librarything.com

name: acfellowship, password: groups

email: groups@acfellowship.org to check for availability

Right Now Media – Offers thousands of free videos including personal devotionals, video curriculum for small groups, leadership development, discipleship, parenting, marriage, studies for men and women, and more. If you need help narrowing down your search, ACF has a curated library of about 40 studies we recommend.

www.righnowmedia.org

Sign up for your free account using this ACF-specific link:

<https://www.righnowmedia.org/Account/Invite/AustinChristianFellowship>

The Gospel Coalition/Crossway “Know the Bible” Series – Free curriculum to study any book of the Bible. Most content is set up in a 12-week study format and can easily be used by groups. All you need is access to the webpage from a laptop or phone.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/knowning-bible-series/>

The Gospel Coalition Online Courses – Free curriculum to study theology, Christian foundations, church history, biblical studies (Old & New Testament), navigating the Christian life, and more. These resources are really well done and are great for group study content. There's easy access to course materials from a computer or phone.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/courses>

The Bible Project – Free, online Bible videos, resources and study tools on books of the Bible, key biblical concepts, word study, themes, genres, and more. The videos are short and do an excellent job of making hard Biblical concepts/books easier to understand using drawings and animated illustrations.

<https://bibleproject.com> (click the “videos” tab at the top to see all the video options)

The YouVersion Bible App – Over 10,000 bible reading plans for individual and group use. After creating an account, use the “Community” tab and the “Add Friends” option to invite your group to do selected Plans together. It's a great way to stay connected and engage in Bible reading outside of group time.

Create a free account at <https://www.youversion.com> or download the app.

First 5 App – Free studies for women produced by Proverbs 31 Ministries. This app offers free studies of books of the Bible for individual or group use. Most plans are 5-6 weeks, but some are longer. You can create a group within the platform for group communication/discussion.

Create a free account at <https://first5.org/> or download the app.

Recommended Resources for Group Leaders

SmallGroups.com

This online resource for small group ministries has tons of articles on leading and leader development, navigating tricky group issues, discipleship, ideas for deepening relationships in groups, etc. Access many articles for free and/or subscribe to a weekly leader email to get useful articles delivered to your inbox.

Ice Breaker Questions

Questions to engage with your group as you continue to get to know each other:

<http://www.signupgenius.com/church/church-icebreaker-questions-for-small-groups.cfm>

Creative Childcare Ideas

Tips and ideas pooled from parents and small group leaders at LifeWay:

<https://lifewaywomen.com/2020/02/12/creative-childcare-ideas-for-small-group/>

Visit the ACFgroups webpage for additional group & leader resources:

(<https://www.acfellowship.org/fourpoints/groups/fp-groups/>):

- Bible Study Tools and Commentaries
- Cross Discipleship Model
- Building Community Toolkit
- Spiritual Gifts Assessments
- Spiritual Health Assessment and Plan
- SOAP Bible Study Method
- Volunteer Leader Agreement
- Childcare Reimbursement Application
- IMPACT Funds Application

Recommended Books for Group Leaders:

The Essential Guide for Small Group Leaders by Bill Search

Leading Life Changing Small Groups by Bill Donahue

Emergency Response Handbook for Small Group Leaders by Group Publishing

Tips for Leading an Engaging Virtual Small Group

Virtual groups present unique opportunities and challenges to engaging and connecting with each other. Here are some tips to help you lead an engaging virtual small group.

Acknowledge that being in relationship and creating community online looks different. If people are new to virtual groups, things will feel strange at first and might even be a bit awkward. Acknowledge this and discuss ways your group might do things to build trust & community with each other online (see suggestions in this document).

Consider that people may have different comfort levels with using technology and meeting virtually. Some group members may require extra coaching/encouragement outside of official group time to help them navigate technology. If group members need to download an app or set-up an account in order to meet with you, be sure to communicate this in advance so they feel prepared.

Be comfortable with the technology you are using. Test the meeting platform ahead of time and ask for help if you need it. Watch a tutorial or YouTube video on how the platform works and to learn about advanced features.

Meetings online are typically shorter, so use your time intentionally. An hour online can feel like a long time. Plus, if you are using a free online meeting platform (like Zoom), you are limited to 40 minutes. This requires you to be intentional with how you use the group time. Sharing the format/agenda ahead of time will help everyone be on the same page. Just as you would in-person, start and end your virtual group on time. Since time together will be shorter, consider meeting more frequently or connecting via phone or text other times during the week.

Set expectations and guidelines for group participation. All small groups are encouraged to review the “Group Covenant” each year or when new members join. Additional **group expectations that are unique to the virtual experience** include:

- Video v. audio-only: Ask your group to use the video function to see each other's faces and read nonverbal facial cues. A sense of presence and community is enhanced when everyone uses the video feature. Note: Using the gallery view on Zoom will keep everyone's faces in front of you!
- Privacy: Ask group members to be mindful of who might be in earshot during online meetings. Suggest using headphones when others may be able to hear private information.
- Avoid multi-tasking: It's easy to start multi-tasking while the group is meeting so ask members to prioritize the time together and honor each other by actively listening and not getting distracted with other tasks.

Keep an eye on member engagement. Are they on video? Do they share comment's and have questions? Do you see demonstrations of agreement/listening like head nods or a thumbs up? Group members who consistently don't participate are individuals you'll want to reach out to offline. Give a phone call or follow-up email/text to ask how they are. It may help you understand why they seem unengaged and will provide an opportunity to connect on a deeper level and show care.

Don't do all the talking. As a leader, active listening skills are more important than ever. The online format can easily become one in which the leader does all the talking and the group members do all the listening. Be aware of this tendency! Practice active, effective listening that includes the following:

- Stop talking!
- Maintain good eye contact, looking at the person on the screen as they speak.
- Provide nonverbal signals that you are paying attention, such as head nodding, smiling, leaning forward, etc.
- Listen for the main point.
- Take notes as they speak.
- Watch the body language of the person speaking, to gauge how they are doing or feeling.
- "Read the room" online for social cues of how others are doing. Do they appear sad, tired, distracted? Be aware of what is happening on the screen in front of you in order to follow-up with those who might be struggling.
- Ask clarifying and open-ended questions.
- Wait to answer and get good at pausing.
- Be comfortable with silence, allowing others the opportunity to share.

Consider changing up the model or structure you are using. Here are a few ideas to try:

- If your group has been focused on Bible study, use a meeting to catch up and check-in on each other with no other agenda.
- Give people in the group a prayer prompt and have them turn off their video & mute audio for 10 minutes to allow personal reflection and prayer.
- Use the break-out room feature available in Zoom to put people into discussion groups to allow for deeper, meaningful participation.
- If your group has been completely online, consider meeting up at a park or parking lot. (With all the physical distancing & safety measures in place!)
- If your group has been focused on accountability, spend some time reading through a book of the Bible together to deepen growth.
- Try to engage more of the senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing) in your online group time. Allow group members to share their screens with an image or photo, integrate short videos, ask them to bring a prop to share (example: an item that represents hope). You may be surprised at the discussion created when you think "out of the box" and get creative!
- In larger groups, pair up people to check in with each other via phone during the week to allow a more personal connection.
- Have fun together! Someone in your group can organize a social gathering online. What about "virtual bingo?" Email or mail photocopied game cards to group members ahead of time, and someone else in the group can call out the numbers during the social. Have a fun/silly prize to give at the end.
- For couples' groups, consider dividing into male & female breakout rooms once a month for care and encouragement.
- For groups with small children, try involving the kids occasionally in your meeting. Ask them to read a scripture, sing a song, or pray with/for the group. Or try hosting a video scavenger hunt! (The game leader calls out an object from around the house and the first family to run, grab the item and show it on screen wins.)
- Use a poll or ice breaker question at the beginning of an online group gathering to get people participating right away.

Plan ahead for viewing a video. Options:

- Each member watches the video on their own to prepare for group discussion. Email the video link or share the video on Google drive/Dropbox where they can access it in advance.
- Some platforms, such as Zoom, allow you to play the video while sharing your screen. Get the best viewing quality by downloading the video to your computer. Videos that are streamed from another website (instead of downloaded) may experience lags or freeze when viewed by others through the shared screen.

Additional best practices for online group meetings:

- Keep things simple with just 3-4 questions or things to share/discuss.
- If your group is more than 4-5 people, it's best to mute microphones when not talking so you can hear more easily.
- Take turns talking/answering. You can facilitate this with some directing and "traffic control" during the discussion. Call on people and be sure to circle back to hear the other response if two people start talking at once. Make sure everyone knows all contributions are important, but no one is required to talk.
- If your group members have young children at home, consider a later meeting time after kids are in bed.
- Think about your "background" when meeting online to minimize distractions for your group members. Bright lighting behind you can make it hard for people to see you. A solid wall or closed blinds seem to work better.

Tools for Gathering Online

Many free conferencing products exist for gathering people online, and we encourage groups to use whichever platform works best for them. Here is a list of free options that we recommend:

ZOOM

- For instructions using Zoom, please visit: <https://bit.ly/2U6wpHd>
- Zoom does require a free account to use.
- Note - Zoom offers free video conferencing only up to 40 minutes for any given meeting.
- Zoom also requires you to download and install the Zoom client which can be found here: <https://zoom.us/support/download>
- For comprehensive Help Articles and Videos please visit: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/categories/200101697>

SKYPE

- For detailed instructions, visit: <https://www.skype.com/en/free-conference-call/>
- Does not require any download or client.
- Works through a web browser.



GOOGLE HANGOUTS

- Requires a Google account.
- Will work on a web browser or through Android/iOS clients.
- For detailed instructions, please visit: <https://bit.ly/3d1dndS>



FACEBOOK MESSENGER

You can video chat with just one person, or with a group of people. Keep in mind, placing calls through the Messenger app for iPhone, iPad or Android may use your existing data plan. Please contact your mobile operator if you have questions about data charges for calling.



Android, iPhone and iPad (video chat with one person):

1. From Chats  (looks like a little black chat bubble), open a conversation for the person with whom you want to video chat.
2. Tap  (the blue icon that looks like a video camera).


Android, iPhone and iPad (video chat with a group):

1. From Chats , open a group conversation for the people with whom you want to video chat.
2. Tap  (the blue icon that looks like a video camera).

Windows

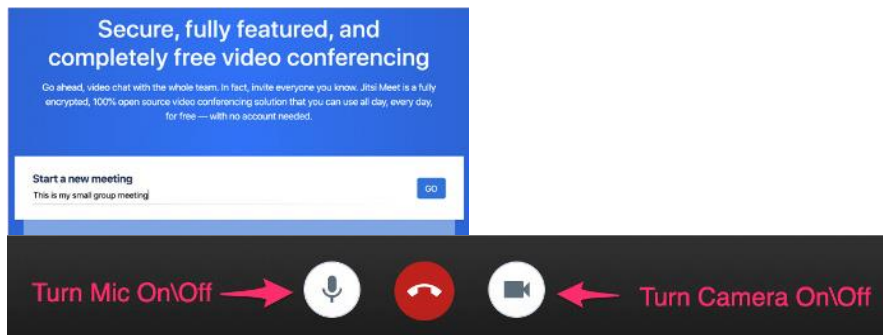
1. Open the conversation for the person or group with whom you want to video chat.
2. Click  (the blue icon that looks like a video camera).
3. To end a video call, tap .
4. If you are having issues using this platform, please visit the Facebook Messenger support page at: <https://bit.ly/33j1UBY>

FACETIME (Recommended only if all group members have Apple devices)

- FaceTime will allow for multiple participants, not just a one on one call
- After initiating a FaceTime call from your iPhone or iPad:
 1. Pull up the Options Bar
 2. Touch Add Person and search for the individuals to add to the call
 3. Then touch "Add Person to FaceTime."
- After initiating a FaceTime call from a Mac
 1. Click , and then click "Add Person."
 2. Search for the individuals to add to the call
 3. Then click "Add."
- If you are having trouble using this platform, please visit the FaceTime support page at: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT209022>

JITSI (Does not work in the Safari web browser.)

1. Using the Chrome web browser, go to <https://meet.jit.si/>
2. Type in the name of your meeting.
3. Hit "Go."
4. Now that you're in the meeting you can control your mic and camera



5. Click  and then  to copy the link to your meeting.
 - Now you can share the link via text or email the link to your group participants.
 - Jitsi also has a mobile app that can be downloaded when the link is clicked on a mobile device.
6. If you are having trouble using this platform, please visit Jitsi Support at <https://jitsi.org/user-faq/>

If you have questions or complications surrounding the use of these tools, please make sure to visit their respective support pages outlined above. Most of these tools have online "How To" videos as well as specific answers to commonly asked questions.