

Mercer Creek Church

Small Group Leader Orientation Packet



Welcome

This guide is a toolbox for our team concerning all things in MCC small groups. The practical information inside will help us in our mission as we depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the end, small groups will lead our church to be thriving and healthy.

Welcome to the MCC Small Groups Team!

On behalf of Mercer Creek Church, thank you for stepping into a ministry essential for building a healthy church. It's our passion to see a small circle of loving family available to everyone who calls MCC home. We believe that God designed each of us with a need for authentic Christian community. Without it, we miss out on the abundant life Jesus promised — a life where we live out Jesus' new command to love others as he has loved us, and that would be a sign to the world that we are his disciples (John 13:34–35).

Jesus gave this command to his small group as an example for us to follow. While a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus is a foundation for Christian living, “Jesus and me” alone isn't enough. Likewise, being part of the congregation at weekend services provides great teaching and impactful worship, but it doesn't afford the opportunity to live out the kind of love Jesus was talking about.

This kind of love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). It's a love that is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres and never fails (1 Corinthians 13). This is the type of love we want people to experience through small groups.

As we lead small group ministry, our mission is to create as many small groups as it takes to see that no one is left alone and everyone finds a loving church family. To accomplish our mission, we want to support you as you carry out Jesus' new command to love one another deeply.

Welcome to the team. We pray the journey for you is full of joy, and deep, loving relationships.

Pastor Dan Arnold & Small Groups Director Kerry Hansberry

Why Small Groups?

Our small group ministry exists to create authentic Christian community. Small groups provide opportunities for face-to-face connection, a sense of family and a place for people to belong. Though small groups can serve a variety of purposes, MCC's small groups are designed to meet 5 specific needs:

1. **A place to live out the “one-another” commands.** There are 50-plus “one-another” commands in the New Testament (love one another, serve one another, encourage one another, etc.), and Jesus repeatedly encouraged his disciples to love each other. Jesus made it clear: the way we will be known as disciples is if we love others the way he loved us. (John 13:34-35)
2. **A place to give and receive.** God has given each believer gifts and talents that are meant to bless and help others toward Christ-likeness. Being in community is one of the primary ways God wants to bless you. It's also one of the main ways he wants you to love others. (Romans 12:3-8)
3. **A place to grow.** While we desire a thriving personal relationship with God, the path toward healthy growth goes through a few deep friendships — and there are no shortcuts. God uses people to grow people. (Matthew 22:38-39)
4. **A place to encounter God.** We are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), and God is the embodiment of loving community — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can encounter God in a unique way in small groups that isn't possible on our own. In doing so, we become more like Jesus who lived vibrantly through a few close relationships.
5. **A place to succeed together where one alone would fail.** “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ... And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him — a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Key Scripture: John 13:34-35

What is a small group?

Show Up. Join In. Be Real.

Groups meet regularly to learn more about Jesus, share life together, pray and serve. As groups learn together, they support each other on the journey of discipleship, knowing and becoming more like Jesus.

Groups exist to create authentic Christian community. Community and connection happen as life is shared with others, through conversations, during group gatherings and life lived together. Groups pray together and are committed to caring for one another.

Groups not only learn together but live out the things they are learning. Groups are committed to serving others in our church, our community and around the world.

Leading a Small Group

Small group leaders play a vital role in helping group members connect to each other to carry out the new command Jesus gave his followers: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

This is a lot like the first church described in the Book of Acts. “They broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people”. (Acts 2:46-47)

A Simple Description of What a Small Group Leader Does

Have a loving heart for God, my group members and those yet to join.

My heart is given to Jesus Christ and I want to love others like He loves me.

Open my home, to have fellowship, watch a video teaching or go over weekly sermon questions and discussion.

Being hospitable and respectful to all my guests is my job.

Serve a snack (or dessert or a meal). *A little food shared among friends.*

Turn on a video teaching or turn to weekly sermon questions and lead a short discussion about the contents.

I don't have to be an expert; I just have to start a conversation.

Serve a need by volunteering as a group 3 times a year.

I will bring the value of serving others to my small group experience.

As a leader, I agree that...

- I will lead my group as described above.
- I will regularly attend, in person or online, a weekend service at MCC (defined as at least twice a month).
- I will develop healthy relationships and handle conflict Biblically.
- I will learn and grow through daily time with God.
- There are no current areas of chronic, unrepentant sin in my life.

Building Your Small Group

Who to Invite

New small group leaders often say, “I’m interested in starting a small group but I’m not sure who to invite.” Where do you start?

First, begin with your circle of influence. Think about your friends, workmates, hobby-mates or neighbors. Be open to inviting people who have an active faith in Christ and those who don’t. Everyone needs community and a place to belong.

Second, look around the section in church where you normally sit. Get to know other people who sit there too, and invite them to join you.

Third, attend a small group launch as a group leader (usually in September & January).

Fourth, ask God to bring to your mind people you might invite. Write down their names and commit to pray for them daily. Give it a few weeks, then call and make the invitation.

Fifth, seek out a people group that might appreciate joining a few others with Jesus as the focus. This could be residents at a retirement home, neighbors, your sports team, or your regular coffee shop companions.

The Small Group Gathering

Best Practices for Group Meetings

A Typical Small Group Meeting

There are several tensions to manage with every small group gathering. It's a challenge to meet individual relational needs of group members, get through discussion content, and make sure everyone is prayed for in a timely manner.

Ninety minutes is the sweet spot for a small group meeting. It's enough time for people to connect relationally, engage with content, and pray for each other. Sticking to 90 minutes leaves people wanting more without overstaying their welcome.

Here's a template for meetings:

7:00 p.m.	Start time
7:00 – 7:15	Visit and reconnect, eat snacks
7:15 – 7:45	Prayer requests & prayer
7:45 – 8:15	Study & discussion
8:15 – 8:30	Wrap up, tidy up, goodbyes

Some additional keys to a great small group gathering:

- Start on time, end on time, and put the right things in the middle.
- Have flexibility for urgent needs that may arise in the group.
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to steer the time.
- Remember that relational connection (ensuring each person feels heard and carrying out the one-another's) is a higher priority than in-depth Bible study.

Praying in Small Groups

Why pray?

We were created to be in relationship with God, and prayer is a significant way we experience connection with him. It's no surprise then that the Bible urges us to pray constantly. (Colossians 4:2 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17) While that might make prayer seem like a chore, prayer is simply a conversation. It is speaking to God, and being still enough to listen to him.

Why pray together with others?

While individual prayer is the most common experience for Christians, praying with others can be a powerful way to experience God's presence in a unique way. Several things can happen in small group prayers that don't occur when we pray alone.

- It's a form of worshiping together.
- A deeper level of communication often takes place.
- It allows us to ask and hear together.
- It enhances our own prayers as we listen to the prayers of others.
- It leads to a stronger anticipation of God's answer. Remember, "... if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:19, 20)
- It strengthens relational connection in the small group.

Important Components of Small Group Prayer

First and foremost, effective group prayer is about worshiping God and seeking his heart. It's less about me and my needs and more about him; more an interaction with God than a call to the fix-it man. It's being willing to allow the Holy Spirit to take us by the hand and lead us through our prayers. It's choosing to listen and to be sensitive to God's direction. It often includes practices such as...

- Praying back to God sections of the Bible that the Holy Spirit brings to mind, for example a Psalm.
- Elaborating on a prayer recorded in the Bible, for example the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.
- Thanking and praising God for his blessings and for answered prayers.
- Praying for specific needs of people in the group.

Something that group prayer should not include is one person dominating the time. Instead, prayers are typically kept short and remain on topic to give everyone a chance to contribute and agree before moving on to new topics. Often a facilitator in the group will be chosen ahead of time to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and move the group on to a new topic when a lull occurs.

Praying with Unbelievers

Ideally, every small group includes people who are not believers in Christ. During the group prayer time, please be respectful of everybody's story and spiritual journey. Never force somebody to pray who isn't ready or willing. Never put somebody on the spot. Avoid situations where you say, "Everybody pray for the person on your right." Always give each person the room and freedom to pass on praying out loud. Make it known that saying "pass" is always OK.

Growth of Small Groups

Sending or Dividing? Yes!

How do we create enough groups so that every weekend attendee can join one? We take a 5-step approach:

1. We recruit leaders who may or may not be leaders yet. We look for those with the desire to be hospitable toward 3 to 12 others, those who are willing to open their homes and hearts to love others in Jesus.
2. We launch all-new groups *or* ask our groups to divide and multiply. If a group gets big, we allow them to determine how to handle their growth. Ideally, groups reaching 12 -14 members, who have been meeting for a year or more, would be discussing sending or dividing. Is there a co leader who is ready to launch their own group? Would it be a good fit for the group to divide and create two groups able to invite new members? Leaders and members should talk about this and decide together.
3. We start all our groups with Andy Stanley's video series "Community", designed to help the group become friends and family.
4. We ask each new member to make an eight-week commitment to begin with. If the group is not a good fit, we encourage the member to try a new group the next time we launch. This idea of small group on-ramps and off-ramps allows repeated tries for the right fit.
5. We invite unconnected people to a small group launch (held in September & January) where they'll have an opportunity to find a newly forming group they feel comfortable with. We've found that group seekers know best what group is a good fit for them. The launch gives them the opportunity to check out a bunch of groups and choose one. We hold small group launches several times a year so group seekers have multiple on-ramps and off-ramps.

Serving Together

Reaching Out to Our Community

There are several reasons why we want to see our groups serving together.

1. Serving helps a small group unite and become a family more quickly.
2. Serving reminds everyone in the group that we're not only here to care for group members, but for others as well.
3. Serving meets real community needs.
4. Serving accomplishes the mission of MCC, which is "to advance God's Kingdom by loving Jesus and making disciples."

Our motto for missions is *pray, give and go*. Ideally, a small group takes on one of our partner ministries and focuses on them for at least a year. As a group, prayerfully discuss and plan practical, tangible ways you can reach out to others in our community and around the world. Choose one of our local or global partners. Talk about it as a group and choose one that your group is excited about. Then focus on this partner over the next year. Pray for them. Pray for the people they serve. Get to know the kind of work they do. Send some encouragement. Donate needed items or even visit as a group!

OUR LOCAL PARTNERS

Care Net Pregnancy Center of Kittitas County is a Christian pregnancy center that provides counseling and resources to pregnant women in our community.

FISH stands for Friends In Service to Humanity. FISH is our local food bank.

HopeSource is a needs based organization that provides resources such as job training, energy assistance, and housing for our community.

SKOOKUM KIDS is a foster transition home that helps care for kids as they first enter into the system.

OUR GLOBAL PARTNERS

Envision Chicago/Family Empowerment Center is a diverse ministry that provides intercity church, meets community needs, and develops young leaders.

Mission 2535 is a multifaceted ministry in the Dominican Republic that engages their community in everything from church planting to farming to job training and education.

Door of Faith Orphanage (DOFO) is one of the largest orphanages in Mexico that emphasizes family, education, and service for their kids.

Use this list as a place to start and see where God leads your group. What common cause resonates with the group? What are some ways we can give the gift of our time, resources, energy, abilities and focused attention? How can we personalize our venture so we build a meaningful relationship with those we are serving? How can we be a good neighbor to those around us? Your group venture should combine good deeds and good news, be relational, and able to be resourced and executed by your group.

Five Keys for a Non-Believer to Love Attending Your Small Group

The best Christian community includes people who don't know Christ. Small groups can be incredibly effective at reaching lost people by offering a loving place where they belong and are accepted.

When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount he said, "You are the light of the world... let your light shine before men so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven". (Matthew 5:14-17) When Jesus says "*you*" and "*your*" in this passage, he's not speaking to the individual follower, but to the whole. Granted, a single Christian can be a light in a dark place. But when a few people join together in an attractive and loving way, they will "shine." Others will see and be drawn to worship a God they never knew.

Your small group can be that little city set on a hill. By welcoming and creating space for people far from God, you're giving them an opportunity to see firsthand what it means to love and follow Jesus. Your small group might be the only safe place a neighbor gets a chance to ask challenging and important questions of faith. Your small group might be the only place a co worker can engage in spiritual conversation without being judged or ridiculed.

Want your small group to be a place where non-Christians feel comfortable and love to attend? Here are 5 keys:

1. **Treat everyone as people, not projects.** Whether people share your faith or not, they all deserve to be treated with dignity. Respect their story and their journey. Love them where they are for who they are.
2. **Seek to learn from everyone in the group.** It's entirely possible that God wants to use somebody who is pre-faith to strengthen your faith. Be humble in every conversation and commit to learn from every person you encounter. Spiritual arrogance and close-mindedness are barriers to friendship. Ask great questions and listen thoughtfully.
3. **Avoid Christian jargon.** Jesus spoke very plainly and used language that everyone could understand. Why? Because he wanted to reach people far from him. He was approachable and simple in his conversations. A small group that is welcoming to non-believers won't use insider language that only Christians understand. While you might be inclined to say, "I covet your prayers for a hedge of protection as I'm trying

to be blessed with the gift of singleness so that I can give the Lord a clap offering and put Satan on notice,” it would be better to say, “It’s tough being single and it would be great if you prayed for me about that.”

4. **Prepare your group.** Don’t assume that everybody in your small group will know how to be welcoming to others who don’t have faith in Christ. Have the conversation. Be intentional. Address fears or concerns.
5. **Invite people outside the church.** This last key might seem obvious, but unchurched people will never become part of your small group if you don’t invite them. Consider having social events that serve as good introductions and connections so that everybody can get to know each other a little better. Be careful not to pull a bait and switch where you invite people to a barbecue only to ambush them with a presentation of the Four Spiritual Laws.

A First Year Timeline

Our lives have predictable yearly cycles and rhythms that make sense for small groups too. For example, summer is more flexible and relaxed while December is busy.

In the beginning, we ask for an 8-week commitment to give a group a try. All new groups start one of these curricula, *Community Starting Well in Your Small Group* by Andy Stanley or *Embark* with Robby Angle, both focused on how to begin or reignite a small group.

After the initial 8 weeks, we ask people to evaluate whether or not this group works for them. If it does, we ask for a longer commitment. We've experienced much success with the "come and see" model and found that 75% of the people who start in a group find a group of friends they want to be with.

For groups that launch in fall, here's a suggested timeline:

1st Quarter: Fall

1. Goal: Share stories and have people feel acquainted.
2. Logistics: People know the time, place and schedule of each meeting.
3. Content: Andy Stanley's DVD series *Community or Embark* with Robby Angle (both available on Rightnow Media).
4. Fun: Host a Glow Station in your neighborhood for Halloween and/or host a Christmas party with your small group where you invite other friends, neighbors or coworkers.
5. Rest: After 8 weeks take a break over the Christmas holiday

2nd Quarter: Winter

1. Goal: Move deeper into transparency, vulnerability and friendships with each other.
2. Content: Choose the Alpha Series or the weekly sermon questions with your group.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global community partners (CareNet, Hopesource, FISH, Skookum Kids, Door of Faith Orphanage, M3523, Envision Chicago/Family Empowerment Center) to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.

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4. Fun: Plan a potluck dinner on one of winter's Monday holidays or watch the Super Bowl together.

3rd Quarter: Spring

1. Goal: Connect a couple of disconnected people in your neighborhood, workplace, or family; welcome a few new people to your group.
2. Content: Consider using content from Rightnow Media. Look for something that addresses the biggest common growth area for your group. Check out the small group channel on Rightnow media to find Mercer Creek suggested content.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global partners to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.

4th Quarter: Summer

1. Goal: Relax, recharge, have fun.
2. Rest: Many groups chose to suspend the regular weekly meetings and instead plan a few fun, relational summertime activities such a barbecue, hike, ball game or picnic.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global community partners to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.

A Second Year Timeline

1st Quarter: Fall

1. Goal: Share stories and have people feel reacquainted.
2. Logistics: People know the time, place and schedule of each meeting.
3. Content: Couples groups consider a marriage curriculum once a year for example *You & Me Forever* by Francis and Lisa Chan or *A Lifelong Love* by Gary Chapman. Or consider *Financial Peace University* or *Peacemakers*.
4. Fun: Host a Glow Station in your neighborhood for Halloween and/or host a Christmas party with your small group where you invite other friends, neighbors or coworkers.
5. Rest: After 8 weeks take a break over the Christmas holiday.

2nd Quarter: Winter

1. Goal: Move deeper into transparency, vulnerability and friendships with each other.
2. Content: Choose content from RightNow Media that addresses the biggest common growth area for your group or use the three year roadmap for a recommended series.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global community partners to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.
4. Fun: Plan a potluck dinner on one of winter's Monday holidays or watch the Super Bowl together.

3rd Quarter: Spring

1. Goal: Connect a couple of disconnected people in your neighborhood, workplace, or family; welcome a few new people to your group.
2. Content: Consider reading *The Art of Neighboring Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* by Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon as your groups focus. It is twelve chapters long but an easy read and there are group discussion questions in the back of the book.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global community partners to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.

4th Quarter: Summer

1. Goal: Relax, recharge, have fun.
2. Rest: Many groups chose to suspend the regular weekly meetings and instead plan a few fun, relational summertime activities such a barbecue, hike, ball game or picnic.
3. Service: Pray, Give, Go...Choose one of our local or global community partners to bless by praying for, giving to or serving with.

The Life Cycle of a Small Group

Birth, Infancy, Adolescence, Maturity, and Death

Small Groups have a natural life cycle. Often groups start small, then grow, go through big changes, and sometimes end. Knowing how most groups go through these normal cycles will help you maneuver through some predictable ups and downs. Some groups don't last more than a few months. And some groups last for decades. But every group has normal stages that mark biblical community.

Here's what you can expect during the birth, infancy, adolescence, maturity, and death of a small group. *(Spoiler alert: it's OK for a small group to die!)*

Small Group Birth

The beginning of a small group can be the most stressful and the most exciting time in a small group's life cycle. There's an initial concern with finding the right mix of people, the right number of people, the right place to meet, and kicking it off. But there is also a great thrill seeing a new group form and dreaming about the potential of what might come through the relationships.

Priorities when launching a new small group:

1. **Establish a small core.** Invite a few people you already know. It's OK if the early days of your group have just three to four people. Build slow; build strong. A core of a few people who already know each other often is a great springboard to bring others in.
2. **Build a positive culture.** From the very beginning, make sure you establish a warm, welcoming, and friendly culture. Do not allow negativity or judgment to take root. It's difficult to change an unhealthy small group culture once it's set.
3. **Provide a consistent structure.** People need to know when, where, and how you'll meet. Determine who will prepare discussions, what material you'll use, how the prayer time will work, how snacks will be provided, etc. Take care of the logistics and the logistics will take care of you!
4. **Connect with your coach.** Don't wait to establish a good relationship with your small group coach. The prayer, encouragement and support you receive will be essential! Make the relationship with your coach your highest priority as a small group leader.

Small Group Infancy

The first few years of a baby's life are messy and clumsy. And it's OK if your small group takes a while to wobble and get on its feet. Discussions might be a bit awkward. Prayer time might have as much silence as there is prayer. Conversations might stay in the shallow end of the pool and avoid the deep. All of this is OK, because it takes time to build trust and loving relationships. So during your small group's infancy, be patient and allow connections to grow at a natural pace.

Priorities during small group infancy:

1. **Build trust.** People must feel safe before they will open up and share their lives. Work on healthy group confidentiality. Allow for discussions to flow without judgment or harsh criticism.
2. **Tell stories.** Sharing personal life stories and experiences is the best food for relational growth. Groups thrive when people can show up and share openly. Don't force people to share more than what's comfortable. Never pry without permission. To the degree that people are able to share who they are in safety, the group will grow together in love. During this time, try to avoid "cookie cutter" testimonies or over-spiritualizing your story. Be sure that people on any place of the faith (or non-faith!) spectrum get the chance to share their stories.
3. **Serve together.** If storytelling is food for an infant small group, then serving together is steroids. Few things accelerate relational connection more than joining together in a common effort outside of the group. Talk about it as a group and choose something your group cares about. (see serve section for ideas)

Small Group Adolescence

During small group adolescence, a group might experience its first major conflict, first big tragedy, or first episode of stagnation. But this time in the small group life cycle is essential to reach maturity. It's worth embracing the awkward and leaning into the uncomfortable tension of this time.

Priorities during small group adolescence:

1. **Speak the truth in love.** Don't avoid conflicts; instead use them as an opportunity to show love, acceptance and forgiveness at a new level. Humility is rarely fun, but always rewarded. Memorize Galatians 6:1: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person

gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.” Even better... live this out in your small group.

2. **Troubleshoot together with your coach.** Remember that small group coach who has been faithfully praying for you? Pick up the phone and call him/her. Work through your difficulties together with somebody who's been there before. Make the relationship with your small group coach more important than the relationship with your small group!
3. **Stick with it.** Just as every parent of a teenager wants to throw in the towel at some point, many small group leaders consider quitting during this stage. Stick with it! You might wonder if your work and investment means anything. You might think that people might be better off without you. Hang in there! To mix metaphors with farming: tomorrow's tremendous satisfaction and fruit of small group ministry is fertilized by the manure that is being spread today.

Small Group Maturity

Few experiences in the Christian life compare to the blessing of a small group of people who truly love each other and are following Jesus together. In fact, Christian maturity as a disciple is practically impossible without deep loving relationships with a few other disciples (John 13:34-35.) What are other marks of a mature small group?

- Salvation and baptism of friends, family and neighbors who join your small group.
- Active service in the community.
- Growth in leadership beyond the original leader.
- Small group leaders become coaches.
- A big harvest of the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23)
- Group members know their spiritual gifts and find great joy in using those gifts to benefit others.
- Finally, one of the biggest marks of a mature small group is one or two people being sent out by the group to start a new group and replicate the experience.

Priorities during small group maturity:

1. **Sustainable and developing leadership.** Give multiple people the opportunity to lead the group. Have rotating co leaders. Develop group members in a way that they can take over the group if the original leaders are unable to continue. Send out 1 or 2 newly trained leaders to start their own group. Commission the

sent leaders and pray for them as a group. Experienced leaders should consider the next level of small group leadership by becoming a small group coach.

2. **Share your faith with others.** Mobilize your small group to connect with friends, family, neighbors and co-workers who don't know Jesus. The most mature small groups will sometimes select basic content that is appropriate for people who are exploring faith in Jesus. Foster a culture in your small group that allows non-believers to "belong, believe, become."
3. **Service.** Take community service to the next level in your group. Choose a community partner to serve with that will provide opportunities for your small group to get out of their comfort zone and create growth opportunities. Go on a short-term mission trip together with one of our global partners.

Small Group Death

There are times when a small group needs to die. And this isn't a bad thing. Some groups have a healthy life cycle that endures for years — or even decades! We don't want to prematurely end a small group just to avoid healthy conflict or dodge difficult and good relational work. But many groups do reach a natural ending point.

How do you know when it's time for your group to die?

- Attendance is steadily declining, dwindling to only one or two people.
- Relationships become more toxic and damaging than life-giving.
- The investment of time and energy has no long-term effect in personal or group health.
- There isn't the right chemistry or bonding between people.

Priorities during small group death:

1. **Pause and refresh.** Before a small group completely dies, try taking a break to refresh group members. Talk to your coach about the various issues presented in your group. Sometimes a summer break and the addition of a few new faces is just enough to rejuvenate a group. But, if not...
2. **End well.** Do everything you can to ensure that there are no unaddressed wounds between people. It may not be possible to heal every hurt completely, but an attempt should be made. Take Matthew 18:15-20 to its full extent and conclusion. Walk away in love.
3. **Start again.** Just because one small group dies, we are not exempt from Jesus' command to love each other as he loved us (John 13:34-35). You might need a

little breather from small groups, but don't wait too long before connecting with others and following Jesus together. Biblical community is essential and should be a lifelong commitment, despite the normal experiences of small group death.

Small Group Resources & Toolbox

The refinery was shut down. It had come to a complete standstill. So the superintendent called a specialty contractor to get the petroleum unit working again. The consultant showed up, hit a pipe with a hammer, then issued a bill for \$4,000.

The superintendent was aghast! “Four grand for that? I could have whacked it with my own hammer.”

The consultant said with a huge smile, “It’s not about having the tool, but knowing how to use it.”

Small Groups have a set of tools that can mean the difference between shutting down or thriving. Here are some resources you'll find very helpful as you become an expert at using them.

Small Group Leader Training Videos

Start with these three videos <https://www.mercercreek.org/small-group-leaders>. These will give you a vision of how and why we do small groups.

Next, remember that we all benefit from continuing training. Check out the small group leader channel on Rightnow Media for resources on how to grow and keep your focus as a small group leader.

Tools for Leader Growth

- **Small Group Leaders Facebook Page**
- **www.groupleaders.org**
- **Suggested Reading List**
 - **On Spiritual Disciplines.** *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton, *Celebrations of Discipline* by Richard Foster
 - **On Personal Relationships** *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud, *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon
 - **On Community** *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* by Bill Donohue

Terrific Content for Discussion

RightNow Media Think of it as the Netflix of Christian learning. Get started at <https://www.righnowmedia.org/Account/Invite/mercercreek>. Thousands of free fantastic videos and online resources to guide your discussions during small groups. Find content for parenting, biblical understanding, spiritual disciplines, marriage, and so much more!

MCC Resource Library We have a modest library of hard-copy resources including DVDs and Bible study guides. Resources are limited but available if online resources don't work for your group. Request the library list from Kerry (Kerry.hansberry@mercercreek.org).

The Alpha Series Alpha has great content for your small group if you'd like to offer introductory discussions for people who don't yet know Christ or people who want to get grounded in the basics of the Christian Faith. Alpha's big idea is this: everybody should have the chance to explore the Christian faith, ask questions, and share their point of view. Learn more at www.alphausa.org/alphafilmseries.

Financial Peace University Run *FPU* right from your existing small group! Contact Kerry Hansberry for more info on how to get started.

kerry.hansberry@mercercreek.org or visit www.daveramsey.com (14 day free trial, 3 months for \$59.99)

Resolving Everyday Conflict (Peacemakers Ministries) Curriculum available on Rightnow Media and DVD format.

Anthology Group Studies www.anthology.study or get the free app.

Pastoral and Leadership Resources

- **Small Group Coach.** Your coach is a fantastic starting point for difficulties that arise in your small group. If there's an issue that seems out of your comfort zone, check with your coach for some possible next steps. You can expect to have the most frequent contact with your coach over your first year of leading a group.
- **MCC Small Group Lead Team**
We are here to support you as you lead. Contact one of us if you have questions or a situation that was not resolved by talking with your coach.

Dan Arnold Executive Pastor dan.arnold@mercreek.org

Kerry Hansberry Small Group Director Kerry.hansberry@mercreek.org

Mercer Creek Church Pastoral Staff

Mercercreek.org 1410 N Main St, Ellensburg, WA. 98926 509-933-7800

Mercer Creek pastors are available to meet on a short term basis for those desiring Christ focused counseling. Individuals need to contact a staff member directly to schedule an appointment.

Acting Lead Pastor: Dan Arnold dan.arnold@mercercreek.org

Care Pastor: Dwayne Smithgall dwayne.smithgall@mercercreek.org

Young Adults Pastor: Paul Stoeckl paul.stoeckl@mercercreek.org

Worship Pastor: Jojo Hahn jojo.hahn@mercercreek.org

Troubleshooting Common Issues

What to Do When Things Go Wrong

Every small group runs into some kind of problem or issue. As long as there are people in small groups, there are opportunities for problems. In this section we'll look at some of the most common problems and several strategies to address them.

With any small group problem, please be in conversation with your small group coach and possibly a pastor. Even the most seasoned small group leaders experience difficulties, so don't be discouraged.

Problem: Child Care

This is the most common issue that prevents young families from even attempting a small group. We love our kids and want them to experience authentic Christian community, but a small group is typically for adults.

Behind the Issue

Group members can rub up against different parenting styles and comfort levels leaving their children to others.

Solutions

- Have each family be responsible for their own child care.
- Incorporate the children into the group. Include a family time, then have the kids move to a different part of the house for the rest of the time.
- Rotate childcare responsibilities. Have parents take turns watching the kids. You can have couples pair up, two dads, moms, etc.
- Have the entire group hire one or more sitters. (***Note: whatever childcare option your group chooses; Mercer Creek Church recommends you complete a background check on all childcare workers***)
- Trade off with another small group in a co-op model. "You help my group on Tuesday; I'll help your group on Sunday."
- Group arranges for childcare weekly but once a month or every six weeks the group meets for a potluck dinner with all the kids. This cuts down on childcare costs and provides an opportunity for families to connect and get to know each other.

Problem: Discouragement

Another common problem is a leader and/or members being discouraged. A silent feeling of “I’m not good enough” or “this should be going better” can be sneaky and debilitating.

Behind the Issue

This problem is biggest when the person isn’t talking about it or receiving proper support from a community and leaders. Discouragement is a lack of hope and happens when a persistent problem goes unaddressed or a negative perspective goes unchallenged.

Solutions

- Discouragement thrives in isolation, so be open about it with your supporters (other leaders, coaches, staff, pastors.) Receive counsel and prayer. We’ve all been there.
- It may be necessary to change how your group functions. Do this with counsel and support.
- Keep short tabs; don’t let small issues grow into a big problem by ignoring them for a long time. Nip issues in the bud.
- Keep a journal that records and celebrates growth, wins, and answered prayer in your small group. This tangible record might be just the encouragement you need.

Problem: People stop showing up

Over time (or suddenly), with little or no explanation, group members stop showing up.

Behind the Issue

Changes in attendance can happen for a lot of reasons including schedule changes, moving, children, etc. But there could also be questions regarding the group’s value or needs being met.

Solutions

- Ask group members if the day and time still works for them. If not, ask the group to decide on a better time to meet.

- Try having more fun. Go to a movie, play a game or share a meal.
- Refresh the vision and direction of the group.
- Bolster the group's commitment to one another.
- Be consistent in your meeting day, content, format, and start/end times.

Problem: Conflict in the group

Conflicts of opinion, personality, philosophy, or beliefs are a normal part of group life. Conflict can range from minor disagreements the group can resolve, to full-on harassment requiring a coach's assistance.

Behind the Issue

Groups can love each other deeply and still experience conflict. Jesus' small group had plenty of conflict.

Solutions

- Keep the circle of offense as small as possible (Matthew 18:15-20).
- Check your attitude. The goal is restoration, the attitude is gentleness. Seek to resolve all issues of sin with Galatians 6:1 in mind "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."
- Remind your group that the mission of MCC is to advance God's Kingdom by loving Jesus and making disciples.
- Deal with issues rather than with personalities.
- Do not allow hidden agendas; be courageous to name problems and bring them into the open.
- Look for win/win outcomes.
- Determine the nature of the conflict. Is this relational? Theological? A matter of sin?
- Maintain confidentiality and respect.
- Consider having the conflicting members meet with your small group coach or another trusted leader in the church.

For more help, see "Dealing with Conflict in Small Groups" on page 34.

Problem: I can't find enough people to join my group

Some groups have difficulty reaching critical mass. When only a few people show up, the experience can feel awkward. Conversations might lag and the empty room creates a downward spiral, leading the few who attend to stop coming.

Behind the Issue

There might be inexperience or inability in gathering people together. Some of this can be related to introversion, shyness, or having a small circle of influence. If you're new to an area or to the church, meeting new people can be difficult. We also live in a culture that tends to be isolated.

Solutions

- Start by inviting people you already know. If your small group is too small, the very best way to add new people is to invite people who have existing relationships to group members. Consider co-workers, neighbors, family members, friends who aren't connected at all to church. Don't limit your invitations only to people who have an active faith in Christ.
- Engage your whole small group to be connectors. Make time at every gathering to pray for the people you intend to invite.
- Faithfully pray for the Lord to bring the right people to your group. Be open to who the Lord might bring, setting aside an image of who that person is. Jesus' group of disciples was an unusual mix of fishermen, tax collectors, radicals, professionals, and blue collar followers. Sometimes the one who doesn't seem like a good fit ends up fitting the best.
- Attend a small group launch event at MCC. We'll give you a table at the launch and you can connect with people looking to join a small group. Have a few people from your group attend the launch so prospective group members meet them.
- Consider joining forces with another small group that is small and having a difficult time finding members. One thriving group with critical mass is better than two struggling groups. Contact Kerry Hansberry for this connection.
- If you're introverted or not a natural people gatherer, partner with somebody who is great at gathering.
- Be OK with a tiny small group for a season. Sometimes it's best to have only a few people. God might be developing and deepening relationships in a core of a few who will then branch out and have a much wider reach in the future.

Problem: We don't have a good place to meet

The feel of your gathering place matters. Trying to do a small group in a church classroom with fluorescent overhead lights might be your only option, but is far less comfortable than a living room. A tiny room with people sitting on a cramped floor can be as problematic as a massive multipurpose room with a handful of people lost and drowning in the huge space.

Behind the Issue

A comfortable and welcoming physical environment offers a huge advantage, creating a place where people feel like they belong. The wrong feel in the physical space can suck the life out of a group.

Solutions

- If you're the small group leader but your current meeting space isn't working, ask one of the other group members if they have a space that's better suited. You can continue in your role as leader, just at another location.
- Consider using a coffee shop for a while.
- If an alternate place isn't available or feasible, dedicate a small group discussion to how to make the existing place more hospitable. Perhaps you invite people to bring their favorite pillow, bean bag, or chair. Consider alternate lighting methods that feel more homey. If you're meeting in a living room that's too small, try moving furniture out and sitting on smaller folding chairs. Use partitions or portable curtains to make a large space feel smaller.
- Ask other small group coaches or leaders for ideas on how they have solved their space problems.

Problem: My group seems stagnant

Like personal relationships, groups go through rhythms and natural cycles. Sometimes your group seems to be stuck in a rut, going through the motions, or caught in a predictable pattern that's become stale.

Behind the Issue

Over time groups can move away from one another and become relationally distant. The priority of investing in a small group is lessened.

Solutions

- As a group, study the parable of abiding in the vine (John 15). Discuss which aspects of group life might need pruning in order to spur a more vibrant life together.
- Invite new people to join your group. Get fresh faces and new perspectives. Be willing to welcome people to your group who don't have faith in Christ or who aren't connected to a church.
- Talk to your small group coach about "hitting the pause button," recharging, then coming back together as a group. Replace the normal routine with a fun, relational evening. Go bowling, eat ice cream, or have a game night that helps people laugh together.
- Refresh the vision of the group, reminding one another of the value of being together in a loving community.
- Finally, some groups are stagnant because they are at the end of their life cycle. It's OK to pull the plug. Some groups need to die. If this seems to be the best course, then proceed without guilt or regret. Be thankful for the time you've had together then move on.

Problem: My group is reluctant to serve together

MCC small groups are designed to be places of mission and service outside of the church. But some groups are hesitant to reach out or take advantage of service opportunities.

Behind the Issue

People naturally avoid risk. We like what's predictable. Participating in service takes us out of our comfort zones. Some people are also maxed out with their spare time and don't have room for serving in their crammed calendars.

Solutions

- Start small. Choose a community partner and begin by committing to **pray** for them as a group. Think of ways your group can **give** to that community partner. For example, buying diapers to donate to the Care Net Pregnancy Center or supplies for Skookum Kids House. When your group is invested in a community partner by prayer and giving, it will feel more natural to **go** and serve with them.

- Dedicate a small group night to discuss which area of compassion connects most with group members. Then choose a service project based on that common concern.
- Talk to other small group leaders and coaches who have experience serving in the community. Sometimes hearing a success story is all you need to jump-start a group toward community involvement.
- Commit to pray for one month, asking God to lead you into service. Then when you sense an opportunity, take it! We not only become more like Jesus when we serve, but relational connection is greatly accelerated when groups serve together.
- Consider having one member be the point person to present and coordinate service opportunities for the group.
- Turn one of your small group meeting times into the service project so you aren't doubling up in a week.
- Promote the idea of neighboring to the group.
- Promote the group's commitment to **pray, give, go** with one of our global partners. (Door of Faith Orphanage in Mexico, Mission 2535 in the Dominican Republic)

Problem: Someone in the group doesn't know Jesus

MCC small groups are designed to welcome everyone, even if they don't yet have faith. But if a friendly and safe group environment isn't established, guests who don't have faith in Christ can feel judged, criticized and demeaned.

Behind the Issue

MCC small groups should not be exclusive Bible studies for Christians only. We need to create an atmosphere of love, acceptance and forgiveness so people far from God are free to grow in their spiritual journey at their own pace.

Solutions

- Regularly remind your group that anyone is welcome regardless of their spiritual journey. Set the tone so that all voices can be respectfully heard without shaming, harsh correction or critique. Encourage group members to speak positively toward a person who doesn't share their own spiritual journey. Use Ephesians 4:29 as a guide for your conversation.

- Consider it a high honor that God would allow you to extend the love of Christ to somebody outside of the church. Follow the example of Jesus who regularly had deep, meaningful relationships with people deemed outcasts by the religious community.
- Structure prayer time at the end of the gathering in a way that doesn't force somebody to pray or put them on the spot. Avoid situations like asking people to pray for the person on their left or right. Always give people the option to pass and not participate in prayer.
- Remember the great commandment to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:35-40). If your unchurched neighbor wants to attend your small group, be sure they feel welcomed without strings attached.
- Strategically plan your first few evenings so that the content, discussion and personal connections help an unbeliever feel comfortable without singling them out as different.

Problem: I can't lead anymore but the group wants to continue

Many groups outlast the initial group leader's availability to host. Because life is complicated, we need good planning and preparation to allow a group to endure beyond any one person in the group.

Behind the Issue

If there is only one person committed to hosting or leading, then the group will last only as long as that individual does. But a myriad of issues might knock a point person out of a group (health issues, work transitions, urgent family commitments, conflicting priorities, etc.).

Solutions

- Co-leaders are the best strategy for extending the longevity of a healthy group. Invite one or more people to share in the hospitality, discussion preparation, or group coordination.
- See first solution above. Really. Groups that have co-leaders will prevent the risks of laying the burden of group life onto a single person. As the group matures, rotate roles and assignments so that everybody contributes to sharing the load. Be ready for a Plan B that includes an alternate place to meet, discussion facilitator, and snack preparation. Sharing and rotating roles within the group greatly increases the sense of belonging, investment and ownership of the small group.

- See first solution above. We can't emphasize enough the importance of having a co-leader! If you lose a co-leader, then identify another one!

Dealing with Conflict in Small Groups

Almost every small group will experience some kind of conflict between group members. But conflict doesn't have to mean chaos; it's a natural part of building trusting relationships. Healthy small groups handle it well by following a few basic scriptural principles.

Principle 1

Make restoration the goal and gentleness your spirit as instructed in Galatians 6:1: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted."

The goal is always to restore relationship. We never use someone's sin to humble them or shame them; we speak the truth in love and let the Holy Spirit do his work in their hearts. We act gently with love, acceptance and forgiveness. We also need to be careful when exposing ourselves to others sin that we don't get tempted.

Principle 2

Follow the instructions Jesus gave in Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Step 1: Arrange a one-on-one conversation between the two parties involved. Jesus instructs us not to involve others until we have done the hard work of a face-to-face conversation.

Step 2: If Step 1 doesn't bring resolution, ask one or two other people to be involved, possibly including your coach.

Step 3: If Step 2 doesn't bring resolution, bring the church into the matter by involving a MCC pastor or staff member.

A Few Cautions

First determine if the conflict is clearly sin. With a personality conflict or a disagreement in theology, we can still use the face-to-face, gentle approach but we don't need to bring **Step 2** and **Step 3** into play. Often we have to agree not to agree, and love each other in spite of our differences.

Matthew 18:15-17 and Galatians 6:1 are written to **fellow believers** who are in conflict; The Greek word for brother or sister (*adelphos*) used in both passages refers to a *fellow disciple*. If the conflict is between a believer and non-believer in your group, realize that the two probably don't hold to the same biblical worldview. If this is the case, contact your coach for advice on resolving the conflict.

Only attempt a one-on-one conversation (**Step 1**) is if it's safe to approach the offender. If there's a history of verbal, emotional or physical violence, the conflict should be handled only with the help of a coach or MCC staff member.

Small Group Coaches

Job Description of a Small Group Coach

The primary job of a coach is to be like Jesus by walking side by side with our small group leaders; to love them, pray for them, encourage and challenge them to grow into maturity. Coaching is all about having a close enough relationship to impact their lives and leadership with your own life and servant-leadership. Coaches will have the most frequent contact with a leader in the first year of launching a new group.

Small Group Coaches are asked to:

1. Agree with and adhere to the MCC Road Map.
2. Relationally engage with 3-5 group leaders to provide support, vision, oversight and encouragement.
3. Pray for the group leaders they oversee.
4. Relationally connect with group leaders once per month.
5. Conduct group leader evaluations at the completion of the quarter.

The Six Coaching Questions

Nearly all coaching conversations are captured by 6 essential questions. Coaches don't need to ask these questions during every encounter with a leader, but they should generally know where their leaders are in these areas.

1. How are you doing personally?
2. What are you celebrating in your small group?
3. What is challenging you?
4. What are you doing about those challenges?
5. How can I help you?
6. How can I pray for you?

Local Resources for Leaders

Center for Counseling and Psychotherapy

1015 S. 40th Ave., Suite 23
Yakima, WA. 98908
509-966-7246

Ellensburg Christian Counselors

Karynn King
Awakenings A ministry of spiritual direction and counsel for life's journey.
360-320-1425
awakeningskk@gmail.com

Jill Schwarz D MA PIlc.

603 N Main St #1
Ellensburg WA, 98926
(509)962-6110

Kimberly Finger Clinical Social Work/Therapist, LCSW, LICSW

109 East Third Avenue Suite 7
Ellensburg, WA 98926
(509) 790-4038

Rachel Yangas Counseling

rachelyangas@protonmail.com
(509)303-4634
Look Rachel up on physiologytoday.com

Celebrate Recovery

Finding Freedom from Hurts, Habits and Hang Ups
A Christ-centered recovery program every Thursday 6:30 pm
Mercer Creek Church Fellowship Hall
1410 N. Main Street
Ellensburg, WA. 98926
celerate.recovery@mercercreek.org

Divorce Care

Please contact Randy Larson at randallwlarsen@hotmail.com to learn more.

Stephen Ministries

Please contact Dwayne Smithgall at dwayne.smithgall@mercercreek.org to learn more.

How to SOAP

When you have your daily time with God, use SOAP to help you think through what you're reading. SOAP is a simple, great resource to use in a small group context as well.

Scripture

Copy down the word, words, verse or verses that stuck out the most. When reading, ask: Who is the author? Who is in the passage? What happened before and after this passage? What things are repeated or emphasized? Then summarize the passage in your own words.

Observation

Write down what you noticed. How do you think the author wants his audience to respond? What does it reveal about mankind? What does it reveal about God? How does this point to Jesus and the Gospel? Write down thoughts, feelings, questions or ideas that come to mind.

Application

How can you apply what you learned? What thoughts or attitudes do you need to turn from? What truths about the Gospel do you need to believe? Getting practical with the Bible helps it come alive in your life.

Prayer

Write a prayer to God based on what you just learned and ask Him to help you apply this truth in your life.

EXAMPLE OF SOAP

Scripture: John 15:5

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Jesus and His disciples are celebrating a final Passover Feast before Jesus is arrested and crucified. Jesus is teaching about abiding in Him and bearing fruit.

Observation: We don't naturally abide in Jesus so He commands us to abide. Following this command is not burdensome, but actually for our benefit. Jesus is the

true vine and if we abide in Him we will bear fruit. The fruit we bear is glorifying God. Jesus says that He taught all of this so that His joy would be in us. The joy Jesus gives is full, complete, and better than any other joy.

Application: How am I abiding in Jesus? In this passage “abide” is such an intimate word; to always remain in Jesus. What are ways I can remain in Jesus? Jesus says I will abide in Him if I keep His commandments, but am I actually doing that? Abiding in Jesus allows me to experience the fullness of joy that Jesus has for me. I can continue to abide in Him through developing a deeper prayer life, and reading the Bible to actually connect with Jesus instead of doing it just to look smart in front of my friends.

Prayer: Jesus, thank You for saving me! Please always remind me of how amazing Your Gospel is. I confess that most of the time I would rather do my own thing than abide in You. I try to look good for others and that only steals more of my joy in You. Teach me more about what it means to abide in You and I pray that abiding in You would result in great fruit for Your glory!

HOW TO USE SOAP IN GROUPS

Each member of your group will SOAP throughout the week. Then have members share one or two things they heard from God. Ask and share with each other how you are going to obey what God spoke to you. Offer the opportunity to have members confess sin that may have surfaced and talk about what repentance would look like, then pray as a group.