



The Roman Catholic
Archdiocese of
Washington

Guidelines for Facilitating a Small Christian Community

The Office of Evangelization and Pastoral Planning



What is a small Christian community?

At the beginning of his daily life, Jesus gathered a group of disciples and cultivated in them faith, hope, and love. By sharing with Jesus, the disciples were able to know who He was, how He thought, spoke, and acted. They were able to learn about Jesus' values and see his works of compassion, justice, and love. By being with Jesus and "walking" with Him, the disciples learned by firsthand from Jesus. Through Jesus' words and actions, He reveals to his disciples his relationship with the Father.

A Small Christian Community (SCC) is a model of being Church that has several characteristics:

- **Guided by the Gospel:** The community is guided by the Gospel. The community is an evangelized and evangelizing community. The community studies and reflects on the life of the Lord Jesus to keep in mind his ways as models for its own actions. The members work to build the Kingdom of God in their own environment.
- **Celebration of the Eucharist:** The Eucharistic celebration is the sign of the true Church. Even though the SCC meet in houses or other places during the week, they gather together to celebrate the Eucharist with the whole parish.
- **Community:** This group of people is more than just another religious or Christian group; it is a group of people who form a community. The community forms when personal relationships are built in

friendship. Each day, the people in the group grow in knowledge of one another and in trust among themselves. The members of that community know the family history of each person, their formation experiences and their hopes and concerns.

- **Service:** The members of that community are at the service of their brothers and sisters and treat each other with respect, love, and concern. The members are a community in ministry. They discern the reality of their lives and environments in order to serve others, especially the most needy and marginalized.

Catholics gather as disciples, as Church, when we celebrate the Eucharist and the other sacraments. However, in an SCC, we come as brothers and sisters to pray together, to discover what the Word of God means to us, to cultivate a more personal relationship with God, to live the experience of community in the small, and to consider how to live more fully the values of the Kingdom of God in our daily lives. In other words, the purpose of an SCC is to hear the Word of God through the Scripture; to relate it to what is happening in our lives right now and then to determine what God is calling us to do or to change individually and collectively. All of this is possible through five essential elements: prayer, faith sharing, mutual support, growth, and works of faith (actions).

Implementation

Before starting a new group meeting, participants need all the logistical information regarding the meeting venues, days and times, and the Scripture passage. If you plan to have light refreshments, this will need to be arranged as well. In the beginning, it would be helpful to have participants wear name tags that can be used for several weeks.

Environment

If possible, have a Bible (opened) and a lit candle in the middle of the space where members of the SCC will gather.

Sacred Song

Playing a sacred or religious song has the potential to create a sacred space in which to hear God's word. We recommend that at least one member of the small group be empowered to lead the song. It can be done using cell phones and the free apps that are available.

- Select the icon for your browser.
- In the search bar, type the title and/or composer of your preferred spiritual song.
- Be aware that not all selections are available for free and not all are spiritually based.
- Put your phone on speaker so all can hear.

Journal

Have a simple journal to write down the word, words, or message that participants are hearing from God. Journaling helps with memory and it also helps one to review during the week to see what God was saying to them and their response.

Meeting Format

When the facilitator is ready to begin the meeting, he or she can open with the following (or similar) words:

- Good evening/morning/afternoon. I am glad you decided to say "yes" to the invitation to participate in this small community of faith.
- My role is to make sure that we keep focused on our topic. As you will see, the format that we will be following is straight forward. Nobody is present as an expert; we all participate, and the Holy Spirit speaks through every one of us.

- A word about confidentiality. If anyone shares something from their personal lives, it is very important that such sharing remains within these walls.
- While we may disagree with other people's points of view, we should always respect them.
- When we share, we use first person verb tense instead of using the second or third person.
- Normally, our sessions will take 90 minutes (decide on the length of your meeting). With your cooperation, we will always start and end our meetings on time.
- To help us to get to know each other, I invite you to share your name, how long you have been in the parish and what motivated you to come to this small community of faith

At the close of the first meeting, the facilitator may add the following remarks:

- I/we are very glad you decided to try this way of deepening your appreciation of God's Word in Scripture.
- Next week we will begin at _____. (If there is a change of meeting place announce it.)
- If possible, prepare for our time together by praying with the readings in your home.
- If you have refreshments, invite the group to remain for fellowship.
- Name tags are a helpful way to help group members to know each other's name. Decide whether to collect name tags or let the participants keep them.

Suggested meeting agenda:

Before starting, the facilitator allows a few minutes for members to reconnect and get to know one another better. Then...

Step 1: Call the group to prayer

The facilitator invites the community to take a minute to consciously acknowledge that they are in the presence of God and ask the Holy Spirit to help them to hear the Word that God wants them to hear this week.

Step 2: Pause for a short time of silence

Step 3: Time to play a religious song, if the group has decided to use a song

Step 4: Opening prayer

Participants could take turns saying an opening prayer each week, or if the group prefers the same written Opening Prayer can be read together. Every SCC is unique; therefore, each SCC decides what is best for them. A written opening prayer example is:

God, we thank you for gathering us together for this time of sharing and reflection. Open our hearts to the Holy Spirit who is present and active in each of us. Help us to share our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Also, help us to listen to one another with love and respect. Bind us together in love and help us to be clear channels of your wisdom and love for one another. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Step 5: Check-up

This section is a sacred moment where members of the SCC share the joys and sorrows they have experienced during the week. They answer the questions:

- How am I doing?
- What has happened in my life recently, joys and sorrows?

Every member is free to share. It is not mandatory. It is a sacred moment because the members of the community can grow in friendship and intimacy. They not only meet every week to reflect on a passage from the Scripture but to know more about each other and how they can support each other as brothers and sisters.

Step 6: Listening to the reading

Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mk 4:9). The primary focus of our listening, reflecting, and sharing is the Sunday Gospel.

- a.) The Gospel's passage is proclaimed for first time by one of the members.
- b.) Short period of silence.
- c.) The facilitator asks participants to identify just a word or phrase that the Holy Spirit impresses on them. They may want to write it down to remember. (There is no need for additional comment or explanation at this time.)
- d.) The Gospel's passage is proclaimed for a second time by the same person or another member of the SCC.
- e.) The facilitator invites participants to listen to the Word of God with their hearts and be aware of what they feel and what specific situation in their life today relates to the

passage. Every member is different and has a personal story. Although, all are listening to the same Gospel's passage, God speaks differently to each of them, because their life experiences are different.

Step 7: Faith-sharing

This segment draws on participants to share what God is telling them, what is God's personal invitation this week, and how they apply God's message, challenge, and invitation to their life experiences or the realities in the Church and today's world.

This is the most challenging part of the meeting because the facilitator needs to:

1. Keep the participants focused on the Gospel's passage. Participants are invited to share what God is telling and inviting them to do. It is not for preaching or teaching others what they should do or how to act. It is a moment when every member, voluntarily, shares what God is telling her or him.
2. Keep extroverts from dominating the discussion and find a way to involve the introverts.

Step 8: Pause for a short time of silence

Step 9: Responding to the Word. Consider the Message

In his Epistle, St. James tells us that "we must be doers of the word and not just hearers." Therefore, members of the SCC are challenged to name one way they can respond to God's word this week. Participants will reflect and share what is one way he or she will act on the message of the Sunday Gospel?

Step 10: Closing prayer

One member of the community can lead this prayer. Every community is different. We encourage the person in charge to be creative and to keep in mind the needs of the members of the community, especially the joys and sorrows the participants shared in the beginning during the check-up section.

Role of the SCC facilitator

The facilitator is a member of the SCC. He or she prepares the members of the SCC to have an encounter with God, deepen and share their faith, and relate their faith to their daily lives through responses that are manifested by actions. The facilitator's role is to keep participants focused on the Gospel's passage being discussed, to prevent participants from dominating the conversation by encouraging all participants to share both thoughts and personal experiences.

In the initial stages of the SCC experience, especially when the participants do not know one another, there may be a tendency for the facilitator to consciously, but more often unconsciously, take on the role of “answer-person” or “group expert.” The participants themselves may unconsciously place the group leader in that role. It is crucial for the group leader not to allow himself or herself to become the “answer person” or “dominant talker.” No one individual should present himself or herself as expert or teacher of the rest. If facilitators find that the participants tend to look to them for all the answers, they can avoid this by simply asking, “Can anyone help (name of participant) with that question?”

It should also be noted that the facilitator’s role occasionally involves helping participants evaluate their SCC experience during a meeting. This evaluation can be done by asking participants to respond to the following questions:

- What has been helpful or good about our shared experience thus far?
- What has not been helpful or what has been frustrating or hindering the process?
- Is there anything we can do to enrich the SCC experience?

The facilitator may need to encourage the participants to be honest in their evaluation of how the process is working. In one-to-one or group relationships, saying only what people want to hear may facilitate harmony, but it will also bring stagnation. On the other hand, giving constructive criticism may be a risk; but where there is openness, this invariably brings about growth and improvement in the SCC process. An honest evaluation must be respectful and focused on how the meeting is run. Evaluations must not be based on personality issues. If one member of the SCC asks a theological question, facilitators should remind participants that the nature of an SCC meeting is to share faith. Therefore, if a theological or biblical question arises, it can be said that they will search for the answer, or the facilitator can ask guidance from the pastor or a parish staff member and report back the following week. If it is possible, the pastor or one from the parish staff may be invited to come to the SCC to discuss the respective question or issue.

In case someone shares a very personal situation and asks the SCC for advice, we must remember that the purpose of an SCC is not to advise or solve personal problems. The SCC meetings are not the right place to deal with emotionally charged issues because they are personal in nature. The facilitator should simply guide the SCC back to prayer or faith sharing. The facilitator thanks or acknowledges what has been

said, affirms the person, redirects the conversation, and refocuses the question. This is also a good method to use when someone goes off topic.

It is important that the facilitator or other SCC member does not assume the role of therapist for participants. If any member of the SCC seeks therapist support beyond the sharing of faith, the facilitator must again lead the community back to the purpose of the meeting. Later, perhaps during the fellowship after the final prayer, the facilitator may talk to the person and suggest that he or she seek the help of a therapist or spiritual advisor. You can say something like this: “Thank you for trusting us. Have you thought about sharing your anxiety (depression, intense anger) with a therapist or spiritual advisor?”

How to be a good participant

The degree of openness and participation by the members of the SCC will determine to a great extent the quality of the experience for all the members.

Participants will enrich the SCC process by:

- Reading beforehand the Gospel’s passage for each week in a prayerful and reflective manner.
- Sharing their thoughts, feelings, or personal experiences of the Gospel’s passage matter.
- Actively listening when other participants share their reflections.
- Encouraging and affirming participants who hesitate to share.
- Keeping the group focused on the topic.
- Offering an honest evaluation of the group process when invited to do so.
- Praying for the spiritual success and growth of the SCC.

Participants will hinder and obstruct the SCC process by:

- Complaining and using the SCC discussion to air their own interests.
- Rambling and speaking off topic.
- Harshly criticizing the reflections of others.
- Dominating the discussion.
- Offering only intellectual observations and rarely, if ever, sharing a personal experience.
- Never participating in the sharing process.
- Using the SCC as group therapy.

Contact the Office of Evangelization and Pastoral Planning to learn more.

<https://adw.org/archdiocesan-offices/office-evangelization/>