



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

Thriving Small Groups

From Gathering to Growing

WRITTEN BY
Scott Hughes & Motoe Yamada Foor





Visit Our Store!

Discipleship Ministries resources are available as digital downloads and for physical purchase at:

<https://store.UMCdiscipleship.org>

Contents

| | |
|----|---|
| 2 | Introduction: Thriving Small Groups |
| 4 | Chapter 1: Small Group Essentials |
| 16 | Chapter 2: The Challenges of Small Groups |
| 24 | Chapter 3: Beyond the Basics |
| 32 | Chapter 4: The Curriculum Questions |

Thriving Small Groups: From Gathering to Growing Copyright © 2025
Discipleship Ministries. All rights reserved.

Scripture passages, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible (CEB) Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.

INTRODUCTION

Thriving Small Groups

“And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.”

—HEBREWS 10:24-25 (CEB)

You learned how to start small groups from our earlier book, *How to Start Small Groups*¹; now it’s time to help them thrive. Wesleyan small groups offer more than fellowship and study—they are a means for participants to experience God’s grace in new and refreshing ways. To achieve this today, we look to the Methodist movement’s history, drawing inspiration from practices that fostered thriving communities.

Small groups begun by John and Charles Wesley—originally known as bands, classes, and societies—were directly connected to the way of salvation. They provided spaces where participants grew deeper in love with God and

¹ *How to Start Small Groups* — <https://store.umcdiscipleship.org/product/how-to-start-small-groups-growing-larger-by-acting-smaller>

neighbor, a process Wesley described as sanctification. The early Methodists realized that small groups strengthened the church by helping people grow in faith and build closer relationships.

In these accountable societies, members were encouraged, nurtured, and held to the rules of discipleship growth. This booklet is designed to help you foster thriving small groups in your community, turning them into places that support participants in their discipleship and inspire them to live out their faith more fully in all relationships.

As you read, you'll find practical insights and strategies rooted in the Wesleyan tradition to help your small groups flourish. By carefully considering one another, as Hebrews 10:24–25 urges, and by sparking love and good deeds, your small groups can become powerful instruments of transformation within the church and beyond.

Small Group Essentials

What transforms a small group from simply meeting together to truly thriving? In Wesleyan small groups, some essentials help create the foundation for lasting, meaningful discipleship.

From the power of **prayer** to engagement with scripture, we'll uncover what fuels meaningful connections with God and one another. These elements are the building blocks of a thriving small group that fosters deep discipleship and authentic connections.

Prayer in Small Groups

Prayer is, perhaps, the most important activity in Wesleyan small groups. In the Wesleyan tradition, small groups are meant to be places that acknowledge and engage God's transformative presence. Prayer is the vital connection linking each group member with God and one another. This shared spiritual practice helps sustain and strengthen the group.

Definition and Significance of Prayer

A helpful way to think about prayer is “intentionally being in the presence of God.” This definition shifts the focus from speaking to listening and being with God. Prayer is more than words; it’s about being aware of God’s presence with us.²

In small groups, prayer should be more than a routine that starts and ends the meeting. Instead, it is a means of grace—a way for God’s power to work in and through us. As John Wesley taught, the means of grace, including prayer, are how God helps us grow in love and holiness.

Incorporating Prayer

Many adults may feel nervous about leading prayer in a group, so it’s important to be intentional and creative when including prayer in small group settings. Defined as intentionally being in God’s presence, prayer keeps the focus on being with God rather than saying the “right” words.

To encourage participation, it’s important to foster a supportive environment where people can grow in their prayer life. One way to help hesitant participants is by using written prayers. These provide structure and language to help participants feel more confident as they develop their prayer practices. Another method is to use a “popcorn” style of prayer, where group members take turns saying the name of a person or situation aloud, and one person closes with a prayer for the group. Allowing times of silence is also powerful, giving everyone space to connect with God in their own way.

² Matthew 28:20 (among other passages that promise God’s presence).

For a more focused prayer experience, consider pairing group members as prayer partners. This practice offers a meaningful opportunity for deeper connection and spiritual growth during group meetings or beyond.

Whatever methods you use, the purpose of prayer is to help group members open themselves to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.

The Importance of Scripture Engagement

Engaging with scripture is another key element of Wesleyan small groups. Just as prayer connects us with God and one another, scripture serves as our guide on the spiritual journey, offering wisdom, challenges, encouragement, and direction. More than just reading Bible passages for discussion, it's about interacting with God's Word in a way that shapes the story of our lives.

Methods of Scripture Engagement

Several methods of engaging with scripture can make small group sessions more meaningful. Different approaches keep things fresh and allow for a deeper experience with God's Word.

One method is *lectio divina*, a traditional practice of reading scripture slowly and reflectively. In this approach, participants first read a passage aloud, letting the words sink in. Next, they reflect on the passage, focusing on any word or phrase that stands out. This is followed by a time

of meditation, where participants think about how God might be speaking to them through the passage. Finally, the group prays together, asking for God's help in applying the message to their lives.

A simple, yet effective method popularized by Dick Murray involves asking three questions for any passage: What does this passage tell us about God? What does it tell us about people? What does it say about our relationship with God? This approach can be used intentionally or spontaneously, making it versatile for any group setting and inviting participants to see scripture as a story of God's interaction with humanity and as a guide for their lives.

Another method is to use **visuals**, like pictures or movie clips, to reflect on biblical themes in a creative and personal way. For example, a card with a picture of a tree while exploring Jeremiah 17:7-8 might prompt participants to discuss what the image and scripture mean to them, how it connects with their own experiences, and what God might be saying through this combination of visuals and words.

Focusing on Engagement and Application

The goal of scripture engagement in Wesleyan small groups isn't to finish a lesson or curriculum. Instead, the aim is to wrestle with God's story, allowing it to guide us as participants in God's kingdom.

By focusing on interaction, reflection, and application, small groups help participants move from learning about God's Word to living it out in transformative ways. This approach ensures that participants are shaped by scripture in ways that influence and affect all their relationships.

The Importance of a Covenant

A covenant is a foundational element that helps Wesleyan small groups thrive. It sets clear expectations and creates a nurturing environment for all participants. By establishing these guidelines upfront, a covenant ensures that all participants are on the same page, fostering trust and accountability within the group.

Establishing Clear Expectations and Confidentiality

One of the main purposes of a covenant is to define clear expectations for the group. Confidentiality is key for building trust and encouraging deep, meaningful conversations. Fostering a space where participants can share vulnerably is the secret ingredient for a thriving small group. In today's world, especially with the reach of social media, it's vital for groups to define what confidentiality looks like. This commitment to confidentiality allows participants to be open and honest without fear of judgment or gossip.

Setting Guidelines for Attendance, Participation, and Purpose

A well-crafted covenant also includes guidelines for attendance and participation. Consistent attendance is important because it allows the group to grow spiritually and relationally. The covenant should outline how often the group will meet, what's expected if someone cannot attend, and how to manage longer absences. Encouraging everyone to participate in conversations ensures that no one dominates discussions or withdraws from the group dynamic.

In addition, the covenant should clearly state the group's purpose. Whether the main focus is on Bible study, accountability, mission work, or a mix of these, defining the purpose helps set and manage expectations.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

Lastly, a covenant should outline specific roles and responsibilities within the group. For example, the group might assign a facilitator to guide discussions, someone to coordinate mission work, and another person to plan social activities. Clearly defining these roles helps the group run smoothly, with each participant knowing what's expected. Sharing responsibilities also ensures participants can contribute their unique gifts while keeping the group balanced and healthy.

Identifying and Training Leaders

Fruitful small groups depend on more than imparting biblical and theological knowledge. They need capable leaders. In Wesleyan small groups, it's crucial to identify and train mature disciples who have demonstrated leadership gifts and a commitment to discipleship. These potential leaders should exhibit qualities like curiosity, patience, and the ability to listen and relate well with others. Finding such leaders is the first step in ensuring that small groups are well-led and transformative.

Equipping Leaders with Essential Skills

Once potential leaders have been identified, they need to be equipped with the skills to manage the unique dynamics of a small group. Facilitating a small group involves handling group dynamics, encouraging participation, and managing different personality types. Leaders should be trained to facilitate conversations in a way that invites participants to contribute, making sure that no one dominates and that quieter members feel able to share.

Training should also cover how to handle potential conflicts or disagreements within the group, creating a space where all participants feel safe and valued. Leaders need to be ready to guide discussions back on track if they veer off course and to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and understanding, even when members have differing opinions.

Continuous Training and Support

Ongoing training and support are essential for developing effective leaders. Whether through workshops, mentorship, or peer-group meetings, continuous training ensures that leaders are growing as disciples and in their ability to serve their groups well. Providing a support network for leaders helps them feel confident and capable in their roles, knowing they don't have to lead alone.

Continuous training can also help leaders imagine new possibilities for multiplying small groups. Supporting facilitators as they start new groups, whether by remaining connected to their current group or stepping out temporarily, ensures that the small group ministry continues to grow and thrive.

The Role of Accountability in Wesleyan Small Groups

Emphasizing Mutual Support through the Means of Grace

Accountability is a cornerstone of Wesleyan small groups and a powerful tool for discipleship growth. It's not about judgment or pressure but about offering mutual support in practicing the means of grace.³ By holding one another accountable, group members stay committed to these practices, encouraging growth as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Encouraging Regular Check-ins on Spiritual Practices and Growth

A practical way to foster accountability is through regular check-ins with a small group of committed disciples. During these times, participants can share how they engage with their personal discipleship practices. This might involve sharing insights from scripture, discussing challenges in areas like compassion or justice, or reflecting on how they've experienced God's presence throughout the week. These check-ins can function as the sole focus of a small group, forming an intentional accountability community, or they can be integrated into an existing small group as a dedicated time for reflection and support. Either way, the goal is to create opportunities for encouragement and mutual growth, helping participants stay on track in their walk with Christ—not to compare or criticize.

³ Romans 15:14.

Fostering an Environment of Vulnerability and Honesty

For accountability to be effective, small groups should be an environment where members feel safe and can be vulnerable and honest. This involves fostering a culture of trust, where participants know they can share their struggles, doubts, and successes without fear of judgment.

Encouraging vulnerability means being open about our faith journeys. Leaders can model this by sharing their challenges, such as times they struggled to pray consistently or felt distant from God. Honest sharing sets the tone for the group and shows that all—leaders included—are growing as disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Pastoral Care and Nurture in Wesleyan Small Groups

The Role of Small Groups in Pastoral Care

In the Wesleyan tradition, small groups were originally established for care and support. More than gatherings for study, these groups are communities where members care for one another meaningfully (John 13:34–35). Small groups should be the church's primary source of pastoral care, providing a tangible expression of Christ's love and a powerful testimony of the transformative power of a caring and compassionate community.

Supporting One Another and Growing through Care

Pastoral care within small groups includes practical acts of love and service. When participants face a challenging situation—an illness, a job loss, or a personal crisis—the group should rally around them, offering visits, meals, and practical help.

Acts of care meet immediate needs, strengthen the bonds within the group, and create a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility. In an age where loneliness and isolation are common, intentional care is vital. By fostering genuine connection and tangible support, small groups are a refuge of community and hope. They reflect the love of Christ, as members grow in compassion and live out the commandment to love our neighbors.

The Priesthood of All Believers

A key principle in Wesleyan theology is the concept of the priesthood of all believers. This means every Christian—not just those in formal leadership roles—is called to serve and minister to others. All believers can mediate the presence of God.

When small groups take responsibility for mutual care and support, they empower all members to live out their calling as part of the body of Christ.⁴ This shared responsibility eases the burden on church leaders and enriches the spiritual lives of all participants, helping them grow in compassion, empathy, and servant leadership.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:24-26.

Mission as an Essential Element of Wesleyan Small Groups

Engaging in Mission Activities Individually and Collectively

Mission is often overlooked in Wesleyan small groups, yet it is central to growing as disciples. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, exemplified a life of service. Following Wesley's example, small groups should actively engage in mission activities such as serving at a local food pantry, participating in community clean-up efforts, advocating for justice, or supporting global missions through prayer and giving.

Making Mission Integral, Not an Afterthought

For mission to be truly impactful, it must be intentional and central to the group's identity, not an afterthought. Set aside time during each meeting to plan and pray for upcoming mission projects or regularly check in with members about how they are living out their faith. A practical starting point is to focus on the needs of the church or ministries in which the church is already involved.

Engaging in mission helps disciples discern their callings and gifts for service while gaining rich insights as they encounter Christ through acts of service. Although challenging, engaging in mission activities offers opportunities for theological reflection, growth in empathy, and experiencing God's love in the lives of others.

The Challenges of Small Groups

Small groups are a cornerstone of vibrant churches, providing fellowship, study, and support. Maintaining healthy small groups can be challenging. Regular attendance can be difficult for people with busy schedules. Every group is made up of people with different personalities, perspectives, and backgrounds. While diversity is a strength, it can also lead to conflicts or power struggles within the group. Miscommunications or clashing expectations can cause friction and anxiety, making it harder for the group to function smoothly.

Understanding these challenges is the first step toward building and maintaining a thriving small group. By acknowledging potential obstacles, leaders can be better prepared to address them and create an environment where disciples can grow together in faith.

Group Dynamics

To foster thriving small groups, it is beneficial to have a high-level understanding of group dynamics.

Every small group goes through different stages of development, and each group moves through these stages in its own way and at its own pace. Recognizing these stages is key to leading and sustaining a healthy group. Understanding these stages can help leaders guide the group more effectively.

- **Forming:** This is the initial stage where group members get to know one another. During this time, members are usually polite and cautious, but they may not be fully engaged. Icebreakers and getting-to-know-you activities help members feel more comfortable and start building connections.
- **Storming:** In this stage, conflicts or differences may arise as members begin to express their opinions openly. Tensions can surface, and disagreements may occur. This is a natural part of the group's growth, and leaders need to mediate conflicts and encourage open dialogue. Working through the storming phase can be uncomfortable, but it is crucial for developing a stronger group dynamic.
- **Norming:** After working through conflicts, the group begins to develop a sense of unity and shared purpose. Members start to settle into their roles, and the group establishes norms for how it will function. This is a stage where the group's identity starts to solidify, and trust among members deepens.
- **Performing:** At this stage, the group operates smoothly, with members working together effectively toward their goals. The group is productive, and members feel a strong sense of collaboration and achievement. Leadership at this stage may focus on maintaining

momentum and encouraging the group to continue growing together.

- **Adjourning:** This final and natural stage occurs when the group's work ends or when members move on. It's a time for reflection, closure, and celebrating the group's accomplishments. Leaders can help by facilitating discussions that allow members to share their experiences and say goodbye in a meaningful way.⁵

Each stage requires different leadership and facilitation techniques. During the forming stage, leaders might focus on helping members build rapport through icebreakers. In the storming stage, leaders address conflicts constructively and guide the group toward resolution and unity. Even in the adjourning stage, facilitators can help participants focus on resurrection, the belief that God will bring new life even through death.

Working through the storming phase is often challenging, but groups that do so can build a stronger, more cohesive dynamic. As a leader or coach for small groups, it's important to recognize when a group is struggling beyond repair. In such cases, it might be best to form two new groups, allowing members to find more supportive and fruitful relationships.

⁵ For more exploration, see Susan Last, "Five Models for Understanding Team Dynamics," *Technical Writing Essentials*, <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/technicalwriting/chapter/understandingteamdynamics/?t>.

Effective Leadership

Healthy and effective leaders are key in developing thriving small groups.

Effective leadership in a Wesleyan small group is about facilitating rather than dictating. Small-group facilitators are responsible for creating a healthy relational environment where all participants can experience God's presence. Leaders should guide conversations to keep them focused and productive, while encouraging participation from all members. It's important to recognize that some participants may prefer to engage more through listening and reflection than speaking.

Effective leaders think about the future. They are intentional about identifying those with gifts and graces for leading small groups, give them opportunities to step into leadership roles, and work alongside them to create new groups. Leaders willing to mentor others can pair with emerging facilitators, allowing them to learn and grow in their leadership skills. This investment in future leaders ensures that small groups continue to multiply and thrive.

Leaders should avoid dominating the conversation and instead create space for everyone to share their thoughts. A good rule of thumb is to see how little you can speak as a facilitator. Instead of providing answers, aim to ask thought-provoking questions that allow the group to discover insights.

Rotating leadership roles is another effective strategy. This empowers different members to take on leadership

responsibilities, which builds their confidence and ensures that the group benefits from diverse perspectives and ideas.

Another helpful practice is to write down each participant's name on a piece of paper. During the conversation, place a tick mark next to a person's name each time that individual speaks. After the meeting, reflect on who spoke the most and the least and consider how to encourage more balanced participation in future discussions.

Conflict Resolution

Even in the healthiest small groups, conflicts arise. How conflicts are handled can make all the difference. It's important to address conflicts early and constructively, rather than letting them fester. Leaders should create an environment where conflicts can be openly discussed to find a fair and respectful resolution for all parties involved. Healthy leaders keep the focus on the group's goals and well-being rather than being distracted by personal issues or being entangled in the personal concerns of others.

View conflicts as opportunities for growth and deeper understanding. By working through disagreements, group members can develop greater empathy and stronger relationships.

Inclusivity and Diversity

Just as handling conflicts well is crucial to a group's health, so is fostering an environment of inclusivity and respect. A healthy Wesleyan small group is welcoming and inclusive of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Leaders and participants should work together to ensure that everyone feels included and valued, regardless of their background, views, or experiences.

When using theological words like *grace*, *Trinity*, *salvation*, or *repentance*, it's important to consider timing and context. These terms, though helpful, can sometimes confuse or alienate participants unfamiliar with their meanings. Giving a short explanation of each term can ensure everyone can follow the conversation. Be mindful of participants for whom English is a second language, as they may require more clarity and sensitivity in explanations. This way, words help us connect and learn rather than create barriers in conversation.

Fostering a sense of inclusion goes beyond language—it's also about celebrating each participant's unique contributions. When group members see that their perspectives and talents are appreciated, they feel a deeper sense of belonging that encourages them to participate. This enriches the group's conversations and strengthens the sense of community.

Balancing Structure and Flexibility

Creating a welcoming environment is vital. This extends to how time is spent together. Finding the right balance between structure and flexibility in your small-group time is important. A routine provides consistency, but a rigid agenda can hinder creativity and engagement. Leaders should plan thoughtfully while allowing space for organic conversations or spontaneous activities that arise during the meeting.

Be attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, allowing for moments of silence and shifts toward pastoral care when the situation calls for it. This approach ensures that the group remains focused and adaptable to meet the spiritual and relational needs of all members.

Sustaining Momentum

To keep a small group thriving over time, evaluate progress and dynamics regularly. Periodic check-ins are key, where members discuss what's working well and what could be improved. Establishing yearly or biannual reviews can provide time for reflection and adjustment. Sometimes, a member needs to move to another group due to scheduling conflicts or personality differences.

Celebrating milestones and achievements is another effective way to maintain motivation and build group cohesion. Whether completing a study, recognizing individual milestones, or simply growing closer as a group,

acknowledging these accomplishments helps sustain the group's momentum and reinforces its purpose.

Beyond the Basics

This section is packed with ideas to re-energize groups. Explore new formats and strategies that can bring fresh energy and deeper connections.

Explore ways to meet diverse needs while strengthening bonds across generations, from the flexibility of **online groups** to the connections of **affinity-based gatherings** to family-inclusive gatherings. Mentorship programs, workshops, and care ministries provide additional opportunities to foster spiritual growth and address life's challenges.

Using Various Meeting Formats

As new technologies develop, exploring different meeting formats can help address challenges like busy schedules and help participants feel more connected. Leveraging technology, forming affinity-based groups, and experimenting with innovative approaches enhance your church's small-group experience.

Online Groups

One effective way to overcome some challenges small groups face is through online meetings. Online gatherings allow people to connect from the comfort of their homes, making participation easier for those with mobility or transportation issues. Meeting through virtual platforms offers flexibility in scheduling, which can be particularly beneficial for those with irregular work hours or family commitments. Additionally, creating digital spaces for ongoing conversations, such as a Facebook group, enables participants to share questions and comments at their own pace without the need for immediate replies. Offering a practice session or early meeting can be invaluable to ensure all participants can engage fully, especially those unfamiliar with online platforms.

A best practice for online groups is to incorporate occasional in-person gatherings when possible. While online meetings are a great supplement to in-person gatherings, finding time to meet face-to-face, even sporadically, can greatly enhance camaraderie and connection.

If your online group has more than ten people, consider using breakout rooms with no more than three or four participants per room. This approach helps maintain intimacy and encourages more meaningful interactions.

Affinity-Based Groups

Another alternative is to form groups around shared hobbies or interests. Affinity-based groups can help members build deeper relationships by bringing together

people who enjoy similar activities. Whether it's a group centered around hiking, pickleball, cooking, or reading, these gatherings offer a unique way to bond over shared passions while still engaging in meaningful relationships, spiritual conversations, and reflection.

While the structure in affinity-based groups should be kept minimal, it's important to intentionally set aside time for prayer, conversation, and reflection on scripture or church worship themes. This balance ensures that the group remains enjoyable and enriching.

Flexible Schedules

Ensure that small groups are accessible by offering meetings at different times. Providing options for morning, afternoon, and evening meetings allows people to participate, regardless of their work or family commitments.

Another approach is to rotate meeting schedules, perhaps meeting every other week or alternating who attends. For example, one spouse might attend for some weeks while the other focuses on children or work. This gives families greater flexibility.

Seasons like Lent or Advent provide opportunities to start new small groups, as the shared focus of a churchwide study often encourages fresh participation and engagement. Alternatively, for groups that are thriving, defined periods such as the summer and liturgical seasons can be an opportunity to pause, allowing small-group facilitators time to recharge.

Family-Inclusive Groups

In addition to offering flexible schedules, another way to strengthen intergenerational bonds is by encouraging whole families to participate in group activities such as serving in a community outreach project or an intergenerational worship service. Family-inclusive groups create opportunities for children, parents, and grandparents to share in discipleship practices and rituals, fostering strong, faith-filled families. These groups help build a supportive environment where all ages feel valued and included, ensuring that everyone has a place in the spiritual community.

Special Events for Couples and Families

Consider organizing occasional events specifically tailored to the needs of couples or families. These events could range from date nights for couples—providing a much-needed opportunity to reconnect and nurture their relationship—to family outings that offer fun and faith-building experiences for all ages. Special activities, such as family game nights, parenting workshops, or retreats focused on marriage enrichment, can further strengthen marital and family bonds within the context of faith. These events enhance the relationships within the family, help families grow together spiritually, and their connection to one another and the church community. By providing these focused opportunities, small groups can play a significant role in supporting and enriching the lives of couples and families in their journey of faith.

Supporting Singles in Small Groups

While family-inclusive groups are valuable, it's equally important to recognize and address the unique needs of singles within the church community. Small groups can offer a vital space for single people to form deep, meaningful connections and engage in spiritual growth. Creating opportunities for singles of all life stages to participate in groups that focus on their life experiences—such as career challenges, navigating singleness, or exploring personal spiritual practices—can help them feel seen and supported. By fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion, small groups can ensure that singles feel valued and integral to the community.

Mentorship Programs

Intergenerational connections can bring a rich and dynamic element to small groups, enhancing the sense of community across different age groups. Establishing mentorship programs within and across groups allows older adults to share their wisdom and life experiences with younger members, and older adults benefit from the fresh perspectives, imagination, and ideas that youth bring. This mutual exchange fosters a deeper sense of community and continuity within the church, bridging generational gaps in meaningful ways. A creative approach to mentorship might involve younger adults teaching older members about new social media platforms—not just how to use them, but also how these platforms shape connections and where they might fall short. This reciprocal learning experience empowers both generations and strengthens the bonds within the group, making the church community more interconnected and resilient.

Workshops and Seminars

Building on the diverse needs of families, singles, and intergenerational groups, churches can further support small groups by offering workshops and seminars on relevant topics. These events provide valuable learning opportunities for group members and can cover various subjects. Whether it's deepening spiritual practices, raising children, caring for aging parents, or understanding social issues, these workshops help members grow both personally and spiritually. By addressing real-life challenges, these events can equip members with the tools they need to navigate various aspects of their lives with faith and confidence.

Care Ministries

In addition to traditional Bible studies, which are often a comfort zone for many churches, there is growing recognition of the need for small groups focused on care ministries. These groups provide support for individuals going through life challenges, such as divorce, grief, caring for a spouse or parent with dementia, or parenting children and youth. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous also fall into this category, offering a safe space for recovery and healing. These types of small groups meet crucial needs within the church and the larger community. By offering care-focused groups, churches can provide vital support, helping members find comfort, guidance, and a sense of belonging during difficult times. By engaging in care-focused groups, members grow as disciples through compassion, empathy, and reflecting Christ's call to love and care for one another.

Building Community Through Shared Experiences

Beyond exploring more traditional church-focused activities, it's important to remember that shared experiences also play a crucial role in building strong, connected communities within the church.

Play Together

Hosting casual events like movie nights or game nights can be a fun and relaxed way for members from various small groups to connect. These informal gatherings offer opportunities for larger connections and deeper relationship building. They provide a break from routine and bring joy and laughter, which are essential elements of a vibrant community.

Retreats and Camps

Retreats and camps offer extended time for bonding and spiritual growth, allowing members to step away from the busyness of daily life and focus on their relationship with God and one another. Whether it's a weekend retreat in the mountains or a summer camp for families, these experiences allow for deepening faith and building community. Retreats and camps can be organized by individual small groups or by combining several groups for a larger event, enhancing the sense of unity across the church.

Pilgrimages

Planning group pilgrimages (more focused than traditional vacations) to significant religious sites can provide profound shared spiritual experiences. Visiting places with historical, biblical, or spiritual significance inspires members and creates lasting memories that strengthen the group's sense of unity and purpose. These journeys can deepen faith and offer a shared sense of accomplishment and renewal.

Cultural Experiences

Organizing outings to cultural events such as museums, worship services with other denominations or faith traditions, concerts, or theater performances can further enrich the group experience. These outings deepen members' understanding of the world and provide new perspectives on their faith.

The Curriculum Questions

What moves your small group's journey from a casual gathering into a transformative community? Too often, groups focus on curriculum at the expense of building deeper relationships. Though curriculum plays a role, what ultimately matters is strengthening relationships and fostering real-life discipleship.

Definition of Curriculum and Curricula

In small groups, **curriculum** refers to a structured plan or set of materials designed to guide discussions, teachings, and activities within the group. It acts as a roadmap for the group's journey, helping to focus conversations, explore key themes, and deepen participants' understanding of their faith. More than just a tool for conveying information, curriculum is meant to facilitate spiritual growth, foster community, and help members apply biblical principles to everyday life.

Curricula is the plural form of curriculum, referring to multiple sets of materials or plans used across different groups or contexts. While a curriculum is a specific guide tailored for one group, curricula represent the broader range of options and resources available to various small groups within a church or across multiple settings. The distinction is important: **curriculum** is the tool chosen for a particular group, while **curricula** refer to the collective resources from which different groups can choose.

As leaders of small groups, it's essential to strategize with curricula in mind rather than focusing on a single curriculum. Too often, small groups or Sunday school classes jump from one curriculum to another without considering the bigger picture of discipleship and transformation. To foster deeper discipleship formation, consider what larger concepts—such as understanding the Methodist movement, grasping basic church doctrines, practicing spiritual disciplines, or advocating for social justice—your groups need to engage with consistently.

Curriculum as an Extension of Worship

For many adults, life can feel fragmented, with various activities and responsibilities pulling them in different directions. Unfortunately, churches can unintentionally add to this sense of disconnection when small-group topics are unrelated to the worship themes. This can be especially true for families, where children and youth might learn something entirely different from what is being covered in the adult services.

One way to address this fragmentation is by ensuring that the small-group curriculum extends the worship experience. Instead of jumping from one topic to another, the curriculum can build on the themes introduced during Sunday worship, allowing members to dig deeper into those concepts through reflection and discussion.

With the help of AI tools, creating a tailored small-group curriculum from worship notes, sermon outlines, and hymns is easier than ever. These tools can help you seamlessly connect worship experiences with small-group discussions, making the experience more cohesive for participants. To learn how to use these AI tools effectively, consider exploring courses from Discipleship Ministries.⁶

By aligning the curriculum with the church's worship themes, small groups help participants apply the teachings to their daily lives, making the worship experience more cohesive and impactful. This approach also helps disciples connect their discipleship to the larger community of faith. Additionally, it reduces the need to constantly search for and purchase new curricula, as the group's study naturally flows from what is already happening in worship. When done well, this method strengthens the connection between worship and small-group study, reduces the sense of fragmentation, and helps participants experience a more holistic and integrated discipleship journey.

⁶ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/content-library/tags/technology>

Life as Curriculum: The Covenant Discipleship Model

While structured curriculum materials are valuable, the most powerful curriculum in a Wesleyan small group is the lives of its members. By using Covenant Discipleship or a similar model, small groups can focus on holding members accountable to live out their baptismal vows or another fitting covenant. This model emphasizes that our lives, experiences, and spiritual practices are the true curriculum.

In the Methodist movement, we believe that God is at work in our lives even before we recognize it (*prevenient grace*), drawing us toward repentance and faith (*justifying grace*). Through justifying grace, we begin growing as disciples who begin experiencing God's abundance with freedom, mercy, and hope.

In a Covenant Discipleship group, members commit to specific spiritual practices and hold one another accountable for their holy habits—mutually agreed upon actions to nurture discipleship. The group's discussions and activities revolve around how individuals are living out their faith, the challenges they face, and how they can support one another in discipleship growth.

This approach transforms the group into a space of mutual accountability, where the curriculum is not just a set of lessons but a lived experience of faith in daily life. While participants help hold one another accountable, their primary accountability is to God and the covenant they have committed to. This allows people to grow at their own pace, supported by the community.

By using the lives of group members as the curriculum, small groups become more than places for learning information—they become communities where discipleship is actively practiced and nurtured. This model reinforces the Wesleyan understanding of the church as a community of disciples called to grow in holiness together (sanctifying grace).

Choosing Curriculum Wisely

If you must select a curriculum for your small group, it's essential to prioritize transformation over providing information. The goal of any curriculum should be to facilitate spiritual growth and personal transformation, helping participants deepen their discipleship.

The most important factor in choosing the right curriculum is the leader who will facilitate it. A well-trained facilitator can make a mediocre or poorly written curriculum effective, while an untrained leader may struggle to convey the message, even with the best materials. Worse, an untrained leader can steer the group in the wrong direction. Therefore, it's crucial to invest in leader training, ensuring that facilitators have knowledge of the curriculum and skills in guiding discussions, managing group dynamics, and fostering a supportive environment.

When evaluating potential curricula, consider how well the materials align with the group's goals and the spiritual needs of its members. Look for materials that encourage participants to engage deeply with scripture, reflect on their own lives, and take practical steps as disciples. Also,

consider how the curriculum fits into the broader context of your church's mission and worship themes. Choosing a curriculum that complements and reinforces what is happening in the wider church community can create a more integrated and impactful discipleship experience.

Reflection Questions

1. How effectively do your small groups incorporate the essential elements of prayer, scripture engagement, mutual accountability, and pastoral care? What methods or practices could deepen participants' spiritual growth and strengthen the group's connection with God and one another?
2. How can your small groups better incorporate pastoral care, ensuring that they are places of support and compassion for members facing life's challenges?
3. Are your small groups inclusive of diverse perspectives and backgrounds? What steps can you take to ensure everyone feels valued and included?
4. How can you intentionally identify those with the gifts and graces to lead a new group? What steps can you take to mentor and equip them for leadership?

Additional Resources

- ***How to Start Small Groups: Growing Larger By Acting Smaller***
<https://store.umcdiscipleship.org/product/how-to-start-small-groups-growing-larger-by-acting-smaller>
- **Small Group Guidelines**
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/courageous-conversations-sample-guidelines>
- **Wesley Covenant Example Session**
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/sample-covenant-1>
- **Thriving Small Groups Worksheets**
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/thriving-small-groups>



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church

Discipleship Ministries resources are available as
digital downloads and for physical purchase at:

<https://store.UMCdiscipleship.org>

1908 Grand Avenue
Nashville, TN 37212
[UMCdiscipleship.org](https://www.UMCdiscipleship.org)
877.899.2780
info@UMCdiscipleship.org

COM2505