

Growing Small

A Handbook for Small Groups at Covenant

The small group ministry at Covenant is a vital component of the mission of the church and is aimed to incorporate new members into the body of Christ, to grow the faith of all participants, to foster community, to develop leaders, and to become more like Christ. Jesus said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20).

A small group can be defined as a community of people that gather to share their life experiences as they walk with Christ. We believe small groups truly help us become better. Through small groups we can influence one another for the positive, deepen relationships, and support one another. It is through small groups that we will grow in faith, in good works, and in numbers.

At Covenant, the small group also acts as a means of communication for the church. Announcements and upcoming activities will be sent to each group leader weekly by Church staff to ensure widespread dissemination of things of relevant interest to as many members as possible. Groups also can participate in mission activities together and act as prayer support for church missions.

Covenant has a flexible approach to small groups. They may come in different sizes, may be based on common interests, neighborhood based, age or gender based. Some groups may span multiple generations that can serve as opportunities for mentoring and intermingling of all ranges of spiritual maturity and experience while others may be more homogeneous in their makeup. The goal is to make them accessible to all members and interested visitors.

Research shows that the ideal group size is between 8 and 20 people. There must be enough members to sustain a group when some are absent but not so many that you lose the personal attention a small group is intended to provide. A group will be together for at least one church season but may choose to stay together longer to continue building stronger relationships. Meeting frequency should be weekly or bi-weekly and can be held in person or virtually. Meetings can be:

- At the church
 - Use of the church is encouraged, especially for those groups with families with young children. The church will provide child care one night of the week (two nights if there is sufficient demand) and small groups are invited to schedule their meetings on those nights.
 - Use of the church at other times is also encouraged and will be coordinated through the facilities director to ensure groups have access to the building.
 - No alcoholic beverages or illegal substances will be allowed on church property.
- Members homes
 - Groups are invited to meet in members homes if that is preferred.

- Childcare can be reimbursed by church funds if babysitters are utilized.
- If large group is meeting at a home, make sure parking is cleared with neighbors and be respectful of people's property.
- Online meeting
 - Use of the church's zoom is encouraged and will be available upon request.
 - Be mindful of members' ages and "technical ability." May need to help some first time connecting to meeting
- Restaurant or Bar
 - Groups can meet at restaurants. Best practice would be to make a reservation for a large group in advance.
 - Groups with members all above the age 21 may meet at a bar or brewery.
- Public spaces
 - Groups may also meet at other areas such as parks, retirement centers, or other public spaces. Some affinity based groups such as nature or athletic activity affiliated groups would be suited for these places
 - Any permissions would need to be obtained as required

Small groups may be created either at the initiative of the "Small Group Development" committee, or at the request of an individual member or members who wants to start a small group. To form a group, a prospective leader should provide a clear description of the purpose of the group, meeting times and location. Sign up will be through a web based or application-based form as well as on paper made available following worship services.

At the beginning of every church season, we will offer the opportunity for new small groups to form and open enrollment to the congregation. We will publicize all open small groups with a clear description of the group's purpose, and time and location of meetings

Organization

The Small Groups development team consists of staff and lay leaders. The leadership team is made up of church staff and lay leaders and drives the strategic vision of small groups, supports curriculum needs, and communicates key information to group members. It also provides training to small group leaders, provides feedback and guidance, and otherwise ensures the sound organizational and theological underpinnings of the program.

- Staff Leadership

- Associate Pastor
 - The Associate Pastor oversees all small groups and leadership. The Associate Pastor provides guidance and insight if any issues arise within the small groups or shepherds
 - The Associate Pastor will also make ultimate decisions on what small groups may be formed.
- Communications Director
 - The Communications Director (CD) will provide support to small group leaders by distributing curriculum materials, helping to identify mission opportunities for groups, and providing publicity to promote the groups.
 - Curriculum Communications
 - The CD will update the weekly newsletter, social media, and the website with information regarding small groups. The CD can also create necessary materials for the small group leaders as needed. This includes creating the small group sign-up sheets for individual groups and shepherds, which can be either physical or digital.
 - Identification of Mission Opportunities
 - If specific mission opportunities arise, the CD will inform small groups that they have the option to have their group work on a mission project, specifically if it is close to the mission of that group.
 - Publicity
 - Small groups leaders will need to provide the CD updated information if there are any changes with their group. The CD can promote the group across social media, specific people within the church through Blackbaud, or can prepare advertisements for the group.
 - The Communications Director will respond directly to the Associate Pastor.
- Facilities Director
 - Director of facilities will schedule rooms in the church for the small groups as needed and will provide access to the building for scheduled meetings
- Lay Leadership
 - Shepherds. Shepherds are a group of experienced small group leaders who are responsible for the oversight of 3-5 small groups. Their main responsibilities are:

- Provide strong leadership by helping develop programs and regularly soliciting feedback and acting on that to improve the program
- Help Reenergize Groups that may be struggling by assessing the situation and providing recommendations.
- Provide assistance in selecting curriculum
- Assist new group leaders in forming a group that is consistent with the mission of the church and reflects positively on it
- Recruit new leaders to take new groups. They will look for specific characteristics and spiritual guidance to determine who they think would be a strong leader. This will also provide the chance for small group leaders to be on rotation in order to avoid committee fatigue.
- Rotations
 - Shepherds will consist of a set group of people depending on the number of groups in operation. One Shepherd will oversee a minimum of three groups and up to five groups. Shepherds have the option to rotate off at the end of every season. In any event they should serve no more than three years consecutively.
- Meetings

Guidelines for Shepherd contacts with Small Group Leaders

For new groups:

Shepherds should contact each Small Group Leader

2-3 weeks into the Season:

The following should be addressed:

- Does the group seem to be enjoying the time together?
- Does the group like the chosen curriculum? Should any changes be made?
- Is childcare working well
- Is the chosen meeting time/place working for the group?

Halfway into the Season:

The following should be addressed:

- Are there any problems within the group that need to be addressed?
- Do you see spiritual growth among the group?
- Do you feel any members need additional contact by a deacon, pastor?

- Are there any responsibilities the leader can share with another group member which might help them grow? Lead prayer? Read Scripture out loud? The leader should look for opportunities to grow new leaders.
- Is there anything the Leader needs from the Small Group Development Team?

At the end of the season:

The following should be addressed:

- Make sure Leader has the “Lessons Learned” document and remind the Leader that it is helpful to our Small Group Ministry to have these filled out. The Team uses these to improve this ministry
- Gather “Lessons Learned” from each Leader (Thank them for serving as a group leader

For existing groups:

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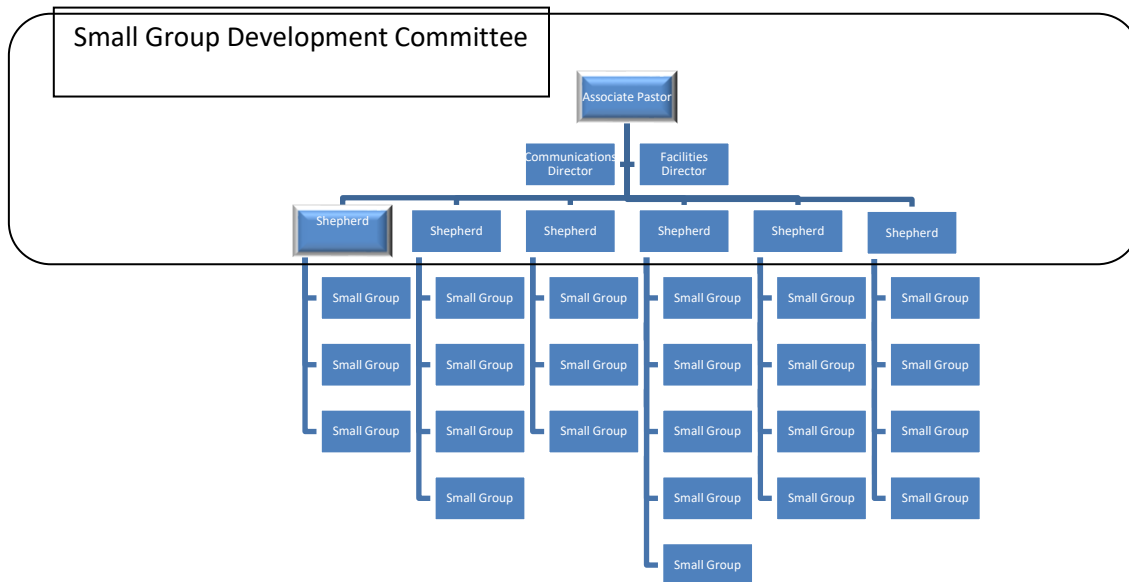
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Small group leaders

- Perhaps the most critical component of the success of the small group ministry is the quality of the leaders of each individual small group. We encourage any member in good standing, or long term friends of the church to be small group leaders. A small group leader should demonstrate the following qualities.
 - Growing in faith: Leaders should regularly attend worship and be active in developing their faith through individual or group studies
 - Flexible: A successful leader will be a good listener, able to moderate discussions and be open to points of view of all members, not just their own. This may mean that the conversation goes in a different direction the group leader planned
 - Encouraging. Small group leaders encourage their members to grow in their faith and to overcome obstacles. They will be expected to develop a personal relationship with each of the small group members.

Small group leaders are responsible for the success of the group. They set the schedule and location of meetings, they act as a communication channel between the leaders of the church and the members of the group, they facilitate discussion which will require preparing or reviewing materials prior to meetings. Small group leaders may be responsible for recruiting members into the group, for coordinating schedules with the management team, and addressing any issues that may arise. Small group leaders will also identify a co-leader for the group to share in the responsibilities as well as to give them experience for potentially leading a group in the future.

Small group leaders also have a pastoral function. Small group leaders will pray for the members of their group and encourage members to pray for one another. They will

reach out to them if the members do not attend meetings to see if there is a problem we can help with. Small group leaders will be knowledgeable about the pastoral resources of the church, to include being able to refer a member to a Stephen Minister, the deacons, or a pastor.

In order to be effective, the Church provides support that the leaders should take advantage of. At least once a year the church will provide a training session for small group leaders. This will cover basic aspects of small group leader responsibilities, use of technology tools, helpful information about the resources of the church, and perhaps curriculum training if there is a church wide study. Leaders also will be given the opportunity to attend Covenant's Charge class for the developing of leaders.

In addition, small group leaders will be assigned to a shepherd who will be responsible to support that leader and help them with any issues they may have. The small group leaders will meet with their shepherds at least twice a season and will provide feedback on what format and activities have worked well and what have not, what curriculum appeals to the group and what does not, and any ongoing challenges or hurdles that may exist.

Small group leader are responsible for recording attendance at meetings, and for keeping the group informed of special events or communications from the session or the pastors. In addition, small group leaders will be responsible for the curriculum. The church will make a curriculum based on the sermon series available but leaders may opt to choose their own.

Below is a suggested outline for a small group meeting.

Meeting time:	Most group meeting should be about an hour and a half long. Respect attendees' time and start/end the meeting consistently on time.
0-15 mins	Meet and Greet. Try to greet each person that comes in by name
15-30 mins	Gather the group and ask an "Ice Breaker Question" (See list of suggested questions- TBD)
30-60 mins	Recap the lesson, review material, ask questions to allow the group to talk
60-75 mins	Break into groups of 3-4 to share prayer concerns
75-90 mins	Review next meeting times, say Good-bye to each attendee

Drinks: Small, bottled water should be provided by the Host. If desired, coffee and/or lemonade can be provided as well.

Food: Food/Snacks should not be provided by the host.

By not providing food, this allows group attendees to bring items to share. This helps attendees feel that they have a valuable role in the group. In addition to letting others share in providing for the group this precedent is set so when new leaders/hosts take over leadership, they don't feel the burden of providing snacks.

Curriculum

Choosing a curriculum is an important part of being a small group leader – and often a daunting task. To help make this task easier, the church makes weekly study material available based on the current sermon series. These handouts are a great place to start discussion. Your group may decide to simply follow along by discussing the Sunday sermon during the following week.

Should the small group wish to pursue a different curriculum, Covenant has a library with several studies from which to choose. These studies include both book-based and video-based curriculum. A leader is not limited to the choices found there. The cost of the curriculum may be reimbursed if pre-approved by the associate pastor.

Look for Bible-based material that has a clear message, is manageable in size, and is designed to build relationships and foster discussion. Material that is not too heavy academically and requires little or no homework is preferable. Look for material that serves to enrich a member's personal faith journey.

Remember that curriculum is meant to serve your small group – not the other way around. Be flexible. If a study is not working well for your group, modify it or scrap it all together. The curriculum should support the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The curriculum should support growth within your group. Do you see members loving each other more, loving God's Word more, growing in a desire to serve.

Periodically the church sponsors a church-wide Big Read. During this time small groups are encouraged to take part in discussing the book chosen for that time. The Big Read is intended to build a sense of community within the church but also to be a time when those who may not attend church regularly are welcome to participate in group discussion.

How can we support health and growth for our groups?

Monthly the shepherd will review the status of the groups with the group leaders and provide support and advice if needed. The goal is not necessarily for a

group to grow *numerically*. Instead we want to pay attention to ways to help our groups grow *spiritually*. We see our small groups as a key way to help people to take their next steps of faith. This means we will collect and review data to observe how this is happening. Are members of the group taking a next step by attending worship or serving in mission or on a team? Is a mature disciple in the group ready to become a leader themselves? Are members growing deeper in faith and relationships by attending regularly? Does anyone in the group have a need that the church can help with (deacon, Stephen minister, helping hand fund, etc.)? Shepherds and pastors can review these questions and help group leaders develop plans and new approaches to support the group's health and spiritual growth.

Other things to consider including

- Code of Conduct
- Resource List
- Calendar