

YOUTH MINISTRY TOOLBOX

# Best practices for *building* effective small groups

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® BEST PRACTICES FOR BUILDING EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUPS

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St. John Bosco is called the Apostle of Youth. Although he is known for his deep devotion to Christ, his continued renown lies in his ability to generate religious enthusiasm in troubled young people, transforming them into faithful Christian disciples. What was his secret? He is known to have spent countless hours with the boys in his care. He got to know them by name; learned the intimate details of their lives; loved and played with them; taught and cared for them. Many of these boys later became priests and brothers who joined various religious orders.

Don Bosco's spiritual haven was by turns a loving home, an open field, a playground, a schoolroom, and a church. There, he and his band of priests and brothers practiced small-group ministry. Into this refuge, they invited the abandoned, homeless, marginalized and street boys. The gift of their time, presence, and spirituality enabled these boys to apprentice with them in how to acquire spiritual disciplines necessary for living out the call to a faithful, lifelong Christian discipleship.

St. Don Bosco's strategy for a successful youth ministry teaches us that a spiritual life can begin in simple, small places as long as there is joy and intentional discipleship. Think about the Church: it began with just twelve apostles. Jesus began His earthly ministry by establishing His small group: the disciples. Relationships, not organizations, were central in Jesus' method of discipleship. This small group of members simply participated with Christ in whatever He did. They observed and learned from His attitudes and actions, as He encouraged others to adopt them. Similarly, in the Book of Acts, the early church was embodied in small communities where truth and faith were infused organically as members prayed and shared meals together. As this church grew in numbers, the fire of the Gospel spread wildly throughout Asia.



The same principle applies to a youth ministry. Through small groups, teens learn how to build Christ-centered relationships with their peers, receive wisdom from mentors, and find a sense of belonging. Small groups create a safe atmosphere to challenge faith and bring conviction to change and transformation. They allow teens to see how they were not meant to travel through life alone, but, through the ministry of discipleship, to walk alongside one another in Christ. The sense of trust that flourishes in small groups affords teenagers the security to be transparent.

In terms of group size, squads should consist of six to seven members, with two or three adults to mentor and guide as needed. Leaders are usually paired to bring accountability and ensure continuity if they, for some reason, cannot attend that meeting. When meetings are engaging to the members, planned with prayer and consistent in attendance, the group will remain a healthy and vibrant source of faith formation and a fertile training ground for discipleship.

Gender grouping helps to maintain healthy boundaries, ensuring that conversations happen in a mature and meaningful way. Adolescence is a fragile time in the development of self-awareness — a crucible of moral, psychological, and spiritual development. We find there is a certain wisdom that only a man can share with a teenage boy and a woman can share with a teenage girl.

Finally, small groups are meant to complement the parish, not replace it. They provide places for young people to get personal with their faith and truly live out their calling in a community. The church, with its sacraments, is still the center of faith in a community, while small groups provide an environment for other important aspects of Catholic growth.



***“Walking with a friend in the dark  
is better than walking alone in  
the light.”***

**- HELEN KELLER**



## THE FIRST STEPS

The success of small groups depends not only on intentionality, but consistency. Unfortunately, the largest obstacle that many ministries face is the unavailability of adult leaders to meet on a consistent basis with their teens. As with any growth, there is going to be pain and sacrifice. Small groups generally meet weekly, at a mutually agreeable and convenient day and time.

To get started:

*Think small. Grow Big*

There is so much pressure today to gain numbers. While our evangelical pursuit must reach all souls, it is important that our engagements remain unstintingly authentic. Without healthy relationships, the ministry will not last.

Start one group at a time. Start small and grow big. Create two groups (boys and girls respectively) of 5-7 teenagers with 2-4 leaders. Boys learn to become men from the example of other men, just as girls learn to become women from the example of other women. Focus on creating the right environment—however small it may be. By starting small, you are equipping yourself to savor the big moments and focus on the larger goals and vision of the ministry.



## Make it comfortable

Strive to create an atmosphere where youth feel free and open to discuss their thoughts, however critical. They must feel comfortable if they are to articulate how the teaching challenges them, upsets them, pushes them, affects them, or convicts them.

A living room or outdoor setting is equally conducive to creating a comfortable environment where trust and transparency can be developed. However, it is important that elders and parents are informed of such plans. Starting on time will establish a practice of people coming on time. Timeliness on both ends shows respect for people. Have a policy regarding phone calls and childcare, so that these and other issues are not disruptive for others.

Start the meeting with prayer. Choosing who starts with prayer is up to the discretion of the group leader. It is suggested that a leader begins with prayer for the first few meetings, until members are comfortable coming forward. Assigning the introductory prayer a week in advance will create discipline and help manage time.





## *Intent over content*

Look for resources that are relatable and will cater to the need of the hour. It is advisable to use resources that require less preparation, so that leaders can focus more on their confidence to engage with teens. In the beginning, it is important that language is kept organic and relational. Prioritize and focus on intent—why you are gathered and how you can bring meaningful conversations to the table.

## *Empower leaders*

Leaders are the face of small groups. Equipping and training leaders is crucial to maintaining consistency, building momentum, and garnering growth. Leaders need training in communication, advocacy, catechesis, and pastoral care. For young people, critical thinking and self-reflection don't always come naturally. It is imperative to have leaders who know how to help others engage in critical thinking.

Youth leaders are not group experts. They need skill and training in how to co-lead, answer questions, and seek to involve everyone in the interaction. We want leaders who are fueled and passionate in ministry to stay for a long time. Painting them a vision that shows the benefits of their investment will go a long way in motivating them to see life changes in those entrusted to their care. Every effort compelled by love will always result in fruit.

## Encourage sharing

Small groups provide a time for sharing faith and experiences. Hence, these meetings should always be places free of judgment where youth feel safe sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings. Ensure that youth have a common respect for the and know, that it is not okay to turn what someone shared in a small group, into gossip around school or the youth group. It is also important to continually challenge this small group, by taking them deeper into their discussion. It helps to ask youth to share more than one-word answers and to really explain what they are thinking. A lot of times too, youth know what you want to hear and will share that rather than what they really think. But as you build relationships they will open up and share their own unique thoughts.

Also do not be afraid of silence, while it may feel awkward at times, youth may just need some extra time to formulate their thoughts. The more you are able to foster care, the more confident they will become in speaking their mind. Remember to be patient with them.



## Foster fellowship

When young people gather together in a small group for a Bible study, the thing that often happens first and most naturally is fellowship and friendship. There is value when fellowship is fostered around the dinner table following a small group meeting.

It can be expensive to have a meal together. People may not have the financial resources to do so. Encourage people not to go beyond their means to bring food, but to share what they do have. By contributing to a small group meal, youth show they are invested in the fellowship of the group. Members can sign up to bring the meal for a night, or the group can choose the potluck route. You might host a progressive dinner from home to home of various group members, or just order pizza. This is not an Iron Chef competition! Try to make the main point about fellowship, not the food itself.





## Pray for one another

Teens need to learn and grow with their peers. In learning to pray intentionally not just themselves, but for each other, they move from spiritual individualists to members of a team. Sometimes, teenagers do not pray in group meetings at all, as they have not been exposed to prayer in public. Gently guide them. Purchase or develop a good series on prayer that will show them how to pray with power. Closing the small group meeting with prayer sends a message that they are not alone—that their needs are important and covered in prayer.

There is much to be added to this framework, but these simple guidelines will enable you to get started. When you pursue authentic relationships within small groups, you will discover a myriad of teenagers coming to church with enthusiasm, desiring to serve the parish simply because they are seen, welcomed, and cared for. This is the gateway to a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ.





***“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”***

**HEBREWS 10:24-25**