

PARISH NEWSLETTER
A Service of the Parish Evaluation Project
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(Same text in an enhanced format
available as an attachment)

Forming Small Groups:

Forming small groups in a parish is easier said than done. Some parishes have tried dividing the parish into neighborhood clusters, others have focused on small community faith-sharing groups to reflect on the next weekend's scripture readings. The difficulty is that only a fraction of the parishioners become involved in these small groups.

Here is an alternative. Start with a limited number of groups, say twenty at most. Assemble twenty group leaders together for an orientation. Focus on two months of the year as start-up periods, such as March and October. Tell the leaders they have two choices; what is the best day of the week and hour of the day for them to meet, and what is the focus they would like for their group. For instance, one leader might want to lead a Monday night group and focus on current events in the world and Church. Another may be a Sunday afternoon person and wants to concentrate on scripture reflection. A third may be Saturday morning person and wants to focus on discussing religious books. A fourth wants to meet on Wednesday during the day and talk about parenting young children or coping with teenagers.

Once all twenty leaders have chosen a time and a focus, then sign-up sheets are prepared for the "small group commitment weekend." At that time parishioners have a chance to sign up for a time and a topic of their choice. People are told that once all the slots are filled – about 160 in all – the signing up is over. They must wait until the next sign-up period in six months. More people are likely to participate if they think there is only a limited number of openings.

For the first month, usually during Lent, the groups meet every week to get started and become acquainted. After that they meet on a monthly basis until the next sign-up period. At that time there is another "small group commitment weekend" where they can choose to continue in the same group or change to another one with a different time or focus. Or they might stop participating altogether and make room for new people.

The twenty leaders meet at the end of the first month of meetings to compare notes and address concerns. They do the same just prior to the next sign-up period to see if they want to continue as is or change the focus of their discussion. The same six month rhythm continues for as long as there is interest and life in the small group sharing. This is one approach to small groups. How do you do it in your parish, or what successes or failures have you experienced? Let us know so we can share them with others.

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