

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

Intentional Small Group Leader Training Guidebook

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Learn more about Small Group ministry at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/building-intentional-small-groups/>. Learn more about Centered: A Christian Discipleship Experience at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/centered/>. Share reflections and queries by writing to wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org or on social media using #wayoflove.

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Intentional Small Group Leader Training Guidebook

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Introduction

Welcome to Intentional Small Group Leader Training, a series of training videos and exercises to prepare leaders of intentional faith-based small groups.

Jesus had many followers, but at the core, he had his family, his friends, and his small group of 12, more commonly known as the “disciples.” He needed those companions. He grew in his vocation because of those companions. He grew as an individual, as a member of his community, and in his relationship with God. And he did so with intention.

During Sessions 1 and 2 of this training, you and your cohort will work together to learn the core skills and best practices for leading and hosting meaningful discipleship experiences. What you do together in this training will equip you to lead small, gathered communities as they explore Jesus’ life and teachings, engage deeply with scripture, and ultimately share life with each other. The third session is more focused on preparing to lead a group through Centered, the nine-session Christian discipleship experience. But this training – especially the first two sessions – is designed to be helpful to leaders of all kinds of faith-based groups.

Over the course of these sessions, we believe that you will grow in your abilities as a small group facilitator, as one who can create and hold space for the work and activities of the group. Between the training videos, your training cohort, and the resources and exercises in this guidebook, we hope you will feel well prepared and supported. Starting in fall 2022, you will also have access to an online facilitator community through which you can receive and share encouragement and wisdom.

We are grateful for you, your ministry to your community and our church, and your interest in leading an intentional small group. We hope this training will prepare you well to lead small communities where God’s people experience transformation, belonging, and love.

In Christ’s love,

Jerusalem Greer

Miriam McKenney

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers

Before You Begin

About this Training

Included in this suite of materials are the following:

- Intentional Small Group Leader Training Guidebook
- Intentional Small Group Leader Training Video, Session 1: Introduction
- Intentional Small Group Leader Training Video, Session 2: Leading Small Groups
- Intentional Small Group Leader Training Video, Session 3: Leading *Centered*

Additionally, you will find references to supplemental materials throughout the videos and resource guide.

Leading This Training

Step 1: Spend Time in Personal Prayer

When we begin any new endeavor, it is always a good idea to spend some time in prayer. Prayer is the practice during which we draw near to God and God draws near to us (James 1). Prayer is the moment when we can hear God's heart, and God can hear ours. It is the place where we are comforted, strengthened, and nourished by the greatest love of all. We cannot give what we do not have, which is why spending some intentional time in prayer is the best thing you can do to prepare to care for your training cohort – as a leader or as a member. Remember, Jesus began his work with prayer: “Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray” (Mark 1:35).

Intentional Prayer Time Ideas:

Pray from Scripture – Offering prayers based directly on God's word can be especially powerful. You might start with Ephesians 1:15-17, Colossians 1:9, or Psalm 117.

Pray from Tradition – Use the Book of Common Prayer, say the Lord's Prayer, or visit [Forward Movement's prayer site](#) for prayers for various occasions.

Pray in Silence – Allow times of silence and stillness for God's spirit to speak to you or through you. Consider writing down in a journal what your prayers are or what you hear from God.

Pray for Discernment – Seek the gift of seeing your cohort through the love of Christ and discerning what God is already doing among the group through this training. Ask God to show you how you can pray with greater insight for the members of your cohort.

Pray for Your Cohort – Consider praying for each member of your training cohort by name. Pray that God will be present in their lives and their learning. Offer any other prayers of intercession on their behalf that you may feel led to. Pray that God will open the doors to spiritual conversations and help develop authentic friendships within your cohort.

Pray for Yourself – Consider praying for God's help in growing in faith, wisdom, and courage. Pray for guidance about how best to love the people for whom you are praying and for discernment as to where people are spiritually and how best you can journey with them spiritually. Pray to know that you are a beloved child of God.

Step 2: Create Your Cohort or Your Individual Training Plan

Just as we believe that we grow as disciples of Christ within the context of intentional community, we also believe that we grow as leaders when we take the time to learn together.

For that reason, we recommend that this training be experienced in groups of 2-12 people, which going forward we will call “cohorts.”

To help form a cohort in your context, consider all the people within your congregation, diocese, or ministry who might benefit from small group leader training. Hint: It doesn’t have to just be people who will lead a *Centered* discipleship group!

- Potential small group leaders
- Altar Guild coordinators
- Senior wardens and other vestry members
- Choir leaders
- Youth leaders
- Daughters of the King and Brotherhood of Saint Andrew leaders or chaplains
- Discernment committee leaders
- Education for Ministry mentors
- Other lay and clergy leaders

Of course, a group learning experience may not always be possible, so we have included modifications for those who are participating individually. You will see these modifications labeled as **Individual Option** starting below.

Individual Option: Not able to train in a cohort? Consider finding an accountability partner – someone with whom you can discuss what you are learning and who might engage in some of the training exercises with you.

Step 3: Determine a Gathering Time and Place

Once you have created a training cohort, set a time and a location to meet and train. Here are some things to consider:

- Does your group need to meet in person or over a digital platform?
- Do you need to meet during the day or in the evening?
- If you are meeting in person, can you find a location where you can stream videos?
- If you are meeting in person, is it possible to meet in a home or over a meal, to model this practice?
- How often will you meet – weekly, biweekly, monthly?

Step 4: Review Guidebook Material Prior to Sessions

Training leaders and training participants should all read the appointed session material in this guidebook prior to each session. It will introduce content that you’ll see in the video and also provide a framework for the exercises and learnings that are to come. In particular, the “Go Deeper” pieces will prove helpful for those who desire a more profound understanding of the covered concepts and practices.

If you are leading the training cohort, we also recommend reviewing the videos ahead of time.

Training Session Flow

Here is a simple structure for your training gatherings, based on the recommended structure of a small group gathering. This flow is designed to create space for community and learning. This structure can flex from 75 minutes with no meal to 90 minutes with a meal, depending on the time your group has scheduled. You can also adapt it to make room for specific content in any given session. Don't be afraid to assign a timekeeper to make sure the gathering keeps moving and no section gets rushed or cut.

1. Welcome and Prayer (3 minutes)
2. Meal – gather early and enjoy nourishment with one another (20 minutes)
3. Content Engagement and Reflection – including watching the videos and doing the exercises (40-45 minutes)
4. Check-out and Prayer (5-10 minutes)
5. Make It Yours Engagement Options – opportunities for diving deeper between sessions

Session I: Introduction to Intentional Small Groups

Session Learning Goal

In this session, you will be introduced to the concept and purposes of faith-based small groups. Together, your cohort will explore why building trusting relationships with God and one another is important to the Christian life and how to form those relationships with time-tested practices for gathering.

Training Facilitator Note: Please watch the video and read over the guidebook before your cohort meets. If someone wants to talk about an aspect of the guidebook in more detail and the group agrees, follow the energy of your group.

Suggested Session I Outline

Welcome and Opening Prayer (3 minutes)

Open your time together with a welcome, an offer of gratitude for everyone's presence, and a [prayer](#). You can choose one of your own, or use the QR code to find options from Forward Movement.



Meal (20 minutes)

Enjoy your meal together. Remember – don't rush to eat, and be mindful of time while allowing space for fellowship and continued community building. After 15 minutes, shift gears and prepare participants to watch the first video.

Content Engagement – Video and Exercises (45 minutes)

Watch the Session I Training Video together. Notice the prompts in the video, including moments to practice Pause and Ponder, and follow those directions and the ones below as you are able.

Practice: Check-ins

Time: 15 minutes

Learning Process: Cohort members learn and practice using Mutual Invitation and a talking piece.

Supplies: A talking piece – a rock, small cross, or other icon that fits comfortably in the palm of a hand and invokes peace (If online, encourage people to bring their own talking piece to hold.)

Training Facilitator Notes:

- Pause the video when you see the Check-in Question on the screen, around the **12:20** mark.
- If the cohort is not in a circle, now is the time to ask the group to rearrange so everyone can see each other's faces.
- Ask for a volunteer to be the timekeeper.
- Introduce/review the practice of Mutual Invitation.
- Mutual Invitation is a wonderful tool to help facilitate group check-in or feedback in a timely yet respectful way.

To begin, the leader or group host shares a one-minute answer to the check-in question. When the leader finishes speaking, she invites another by name to share, not necessarily the person next to her. The person who has been invited may wish to say "thank you" for the invitation and then proceed to share. After the next person has spoken, that person then invites another to share. If some are not ready to share yet, they may say, "I pass for now," and the group leader will invite them to share again later.

If some do not want to share at all during the session, they may say, “I will pass,” and then proceed to invite another to share. Group members continue inviting each other until everyone has been invited. (Adapted from *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb* by Eric H. F. Law)

- Encourage leaders to revisit the *Helpful Tips for Facilitating Check-ins and Mutual Invitation* below before their first small group meeting, as it will be helpful for explaining the practice to the small groups they are leading.
- Practice Mutual Invitation with the check-in question as shown in the video: “Why did you decide to take part in this journey?”
- After your check-in is complete, resume the video.

Individual Option

Take some time to consider the check-in question for yourself. Consider finding a friend or mentor to share answers with, or write about it in a journal.

Helpful Tips for Facilitating Check-ins and Mutual Invitation

Tip 1: Connect your check-in questions to the content you will be exploring during your small group gathering.

For example: If you are exploring a Way of Love spiritual practice over the course of several weeks and your current session is about the practice Pray, you may want to offer a check-in question about prayer, such as: “What kind of prayer connects you best with God?”

Tip 2: If your group is having trouble connecting, consider using the same check-in question each week.

This practice often works best with groups who are just getting to know each other. *For example:* Consider offering a question that helps group members center themselves in the moment, such as: “How are you arriving?” or “What did you carry with you from our last session to today?”

Tip 3: Remember the purpose of check-ins.

While someone’s check-in answer might trigger a memory or response in another person, check-in is **not about responding to the last person who spoke**. Check-in is about each individual’s answer to the question, and each person offers one’s own personal response. Feel free to remind the group of this from time to time if check-ins begin to get off track.

Tip 4: Use a talking piece.

Whether in person or online, we recommend using a talking piece. A talking piece is a physical object that a person holds while speaking. A gift from oral traditions, a talking piece might be a rock, a small cross, a poem on a card, a meaningful piece of jewelry, or anything that fits comfortably in hand and invokes peace. A talking piece is a great tool to remind everyone in the group to listen deeply when they’re not holding it. When the speaker finishes, she can pass the piece to the left or right, or place the piece in the center for someone else to pick up. Use phrases like, “I’ll pick up the piece” to signal beginning to speak, and “The piece is in the center” to signal when finished speaking. Bonus: Speaking these words works with or without an actual talking piece and if you’re online. It might seem awkward at first, but keep trying it out, since it’s a time-honored way to encourage intentional speaking and respectful listening.

Pause and Ponder: Small Group Discussion

Time: 10-15 minutes

Learning Process: Cohort members will practice sharing, now at greater length.

Training Facilitator Notes:

- Pause the video after Pause and Ponder has been explained, around the 13:19 mark.
- Ask the cohort to break into groups of 2-3.
- Ask for a volunteer to be the timekeeper. Each person should receive 5 minutes to share within the smaller group.
- Offer this prompt (as shown in the video) to the smaller groups before they begin: “Where do you find small groups in your life?” (Consider family, friends, colleagues, classmates, church members, or club or team members. Some of those groups already have the qualities of an intentional small group.)
- Encourage training participants to continue the conversation in their circles, with questions like these:
 - Is there a sense of purpose when you gather?
 - How have these groups impacted your life in a positive way?
 - In which groups do you feel you can be your authentic self?
 - What conditions made it possible for you to experience that openness and safety?
 - Did you notice anything the facilitator or leader did that helped to create those conditions?
- After everyone has shared within their smaller groups, take a moment to reflect as the larger cohort. (Spend a maximum of 5 minutes on this.)
 - What themes or practices rose up from the various stories?
 - What did members learn that they can use in their own small group facilitation?
- Once the group has finished sharing, resume and finish the Session I Training Video.

Individual Option

Find a quiet place to sit, ponder, and reflect. Then write your answers to the following questions in a journal. Later, after you have reflected, consider sharing your answers and insights with a friend or colleague. Perhaps even share on social media a story like the ones in the video.

- Where do you find small groups in your life? Consider family, friends, colleagues, classmates, church members, or club or team members. Some of those groups already have the qualities of an intentional small group.
- Is there a sense of purpose when you gather?
- How have these groups impacted your life in a positive way?

- In which groups do you feel you can be your authentic self?
- What conditions made it possible for you to experience that openness and safety?
- Did you notice anything the facilitator or leader did that helped to create those conditions?

Check-out and Closing Prayer (7 minutes)

For check-out, confirm the time and location for the next session and share the Make It Yours opportunities. If you're online, paste them into the chat box or remind members to review the guidebook. Then invite group members to share one word about the time you've spent together.

Close with prayer, inviting everyone to share what they hope other group members will pray for on their behalf between now and the next session. Then the facilitator or a designated volunteer can gather the prayers and offer them up. Pray spontaneously and simply to God in gratitude, or choose a favorite prayer from the Book of Common Prayer or other prayer books. Especially if you're together in the evening, consider this prayer from the Compline service:

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace. Amen.

Make It Yours Home Engagement Options

Below you will find some additional practices, resources, and concepts for leading intentional small groups and for developing your own spiritual vitality. We hope you will take the time to consider these resources and then discuss them – or your experiences – with others in your cohort as you are able.

Option 1

Take the My Way of Love Spiritual Life Inventory

As you seek to take care of your own spiritual health, consider **My Way of Love**. This Spiritual Life Inventory is more than a quiz; it's a personal guide for the spiritual journey, providing coaching to help individuals grow along the [seven practices for Jesus-centered life](#): Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. It begins with a brief online survey to assess where you are in your spiritual life.



Once your responses have been processed, you will receive an email with a helpful explanation of the findings, along with some tips for improving your spiritual journey. You'll also be given a chance to sign up for an eight-week series of emails that will offer some suggestions, coaching for growing spiritually, and ways to go deeper in love of God and neighbor.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/my-way-of-love/>

Option 2

Find Inspiration for Leading a Small Group

In the training video, you heard from a diverse, global group of Episcopalians and Anglicans about the power of small groups on *Why Do Small Groups Matter?* Below is the text from that testimonial piece. Read through the quotations, and look for one that speaks to you. Copy it in your journal, or write it on a Post-it Note and place it where you can see it often. You might get even more creative and design a shareable graphic of the quotation for yourself and/or for your group.

Why Do Small Groups Matter? Testimonies

What can I say about small group gatherings? They have been one of the most powerful forces in my life for building long-lasting relationships and gaining new perspectives.

—Kim Coleman

We never outgrow the need for intimacy and hospitality. We never outgrow the need for curiosity, for safety, for conversation. We never outgrow the need to belong and to be in a space where we are loved. Small groups can create that space for those things.

—Andrea Farley

In September last year, as part of a new vision to be followers of Jesus Christ growing in faith, growing in number, and serving the community, a strategic decision was made to not have some small groups but to become a church of small groups.

—*Jolyon Trickey*

I need small groups because they gift me with accountability. They help me look into my blind spots. They calm my waters when I need calming. And they disturb my waters when they need disturbing.

—*Ken Howard*

Small groups have always been really important to me, to who I am, that group of friends, colleagues that support. That encouragement was just so important.

—*Anthony Guillen*

We found it to be incredibly meaningful to see each other's spaces, to hear each other's voices, to know that we are seen and heard in community and by God and to know that we belong and that we are loved.

—*Anne-Marie Witchger*

It is an opportunity for the community to share and bond with one another, a smaller community to do that, growing spiritually mature in Christ together.

—*Kaity Chang*

I've been at St. Peter's now for about seven years. And when we came to St. Peter's Parish, we had membership that was about 200 and going down. Within the space of four to five years, our membership was over 800. One of the key areas that allowed us to grow and expand in that way is the promotion of small groups.

—*Robert Sihubwa*

Bishop Samuel Wylie who served here in northern Michigan in the early 1970s wrote a beautiful document called "[The Celebration of Smallness](#)." And in it, he reminds us that smallness is actually the Christian norm. Our Savior was assigned to a stable rather than a palace. He was born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, and he grew up in Nazareth where people wondered, can anything good actually come out of that place? His friends made their living by fishing and collecting taxes and included women and Samaritans and everyday sinners, not politicians and high priests and people in power.

—*Lydia Bucklin*

Authenticity, vulnerability, curiosity, friendship, and every once in a while, craziness. These are the benefits that we are deriving from our small group.

—*Kim Coleman*

It's a place of community, loving, caring, and sharing. It's where disciple-making happens through peer mentoring. That's where we learn not to go to church but to be the church. And all that is extremely important at a time such as this.

—Trevor Pearce

Option 3

Read “Building Intentional Small Groups”

If you are new to intentional small group ministry, we encourage you to review the resources found at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/building-intentional-small-groups/>, in particular the “Building Intentional Small Groups” guidebook. This booklet is a wonderful do-it-yourself guide to all aspects of creating a ministry of small, gathered communities that fits your context.



Additional Leadership Tips and Resources

Here are some additional tips and resources related to small group ministry for you to review as you are able.

Video: [How Do Small Groups Change Lives? Building Intentional Small Groups](#)

Video: [What Kinds of Small Groups Are There? Building Intentional Small Groups](#)

Video: [Building Intentional Small Groups](#) Webinar, Part 1

Video: [Building Intentional Small Groups](#) Webinar, Part 2

Session 2: Leading Small Groups

Session Learning Goals

In this session, we learn more about the practice of small group ministry leadership. During your time together as a learning cohort, you and the other leaders in this training will discuss topics like leading groups, creating group covenants, and handling group management.

The best training to be a small group facilitator is having taken part in a well-functioning small group in the past. Whether you have had that experience or not, you can develop and practice the attributes and skills that a group facilitator needs. We hope that this training can serve as a model of a healthy and rich (if brief) small group experience.

Training Facilitator Note: Please watch the video and read over the guidebook before your cohort meets. If some in your cohort need to review an aspect of the guidebook in more detail and the group agrees, follow the energy of your group.

Suggested Session 2 Outline

Welcome and Opening Prayer (3 minutes)

Open your time together with a welcome, an offer of gratitude for everyone's presence, and a [prayer](#). You can choose one of your own, or use the QR code to find options from Forward Movement.



Meal and/or Check-in (20 minutes)

If you are eating together, enjoy your meal. Remember – don't rush to eat, and be mindful of time while allowing space for fellowship and continued community building. After 15 minutes focused on the meal, you can shift gears and proceed with your check-in question and practice, and then prepare people to watch the first video. If you are not eating together, you may proceed to your check-in.

Suggested Check-in Question: "Which Way of Love practice is nourishing you right now?"

Content Engagement – Video and Exercises (40 minutes)

Watch the Session 2 Training Video together. Notice the prompts in the video, and follow those directions and the instructions below as you are able.

Practice 1: Small Group Conversation

Time: 15 minutes

Learning Process: Cohort members learn, or refresh their knowledge of, the practices of good small group facilitation, Mutual Invitation, and the use of a talking piece.

Supplies: Timer; Talking piece – a rock, small cross, or other icon that fits comfortably in the palm of a hand and invokes peace (This piece can change with each check-in or remain the same. If online, encourage people to bring their own talking piece to hold.); Training Guidebook

Training Facilitator Notes:

- Pause the video at **5:38**. This is the break between Facilitator Guidelines and Creating a Covenant.
- Ask the cohort to break into groups of 2-3.
- Ask for a volunteer to be the timekeeper. Each person should receive 5 minutes to share within their smaller group.
- Encourage the groups to refer to **Concept Review: Best Practices for Facilitating an Intentional Small Group Conversation** (below), if needed.
- Offer this prompt to the groups before they begin:

- Which attributes of a good facilitator are you most comfortable with?
- What areas do you seek to improve with practice?
- After everyone has shared within their smaller groups, take a moment to reflect as the larger cohort. (Spend a maximum of 5 minutes on this.)
 - What elements of good facilitation feel especially important?
 - How could you improve your skills and practice one of the attributes that is more of a stretch?
- Once the group has finished sharing, resume the video.

Individual Option

Record your thoughts and questions in a notebook or journal. In Session 1, we recommended finding an accountability partner. Identify at least one person with whom you can discuss these concepts, and schedule time to meet with that person.



Concept Review:

Best Practices for Facilitating an Intentional Small Group Conversation

- Host meaningful conversations. Good facilitators know how to move the conversation along, keep everyone engaged, and address issues as they arise.
- Know the discussion material. This helps leaders to pose thoughtful questions and rephrase them as needed. They don't need to be experts.
- Listen to the conversation, while also paying attention to group members' body language and engagement.
- Engage those who speak less and those who take up more space.
- Use silence and engage the group with activities to increase their comfort with silence.
- Use vulnerability and move the conversation out of the head and into the heart. Good small group leaders use questions like, "How does what you just shared relate to your relationship with God?" or "How does it make you feel that...?"
- When things get off track, focus or refocus the conversation with a query like, "I wonder if anyone has thoughts about the topic at hand."
- Draw people back to the covenant if someone breaks group norms.
- Share leadership with others in the group, as appropriate.
- Model good boundaries and discretion.

Practice 2: Creating a Sample Covenant

Time: 15-20 minutes

Action: Create a sample covenant with your cohort of leaders in training.

Take a few minutes to review the guidelines and examples below, and then work together to create a covenant you could show to a small group as a model.

Learning Process: Cohort members learn, or refresh their knowledge of, the practices of creating a covenant, good small group facilitation, Mutual Invitation, and the use of a talking piece.

Supplies: Timer; Talking piece – a rock, small cross, or other icon that fits comfortably in the palm of a hand and invokes peace (This piece can change with each check-in or remain the same. If online, encourage people to bring their own talking piece to hold.); Poster paper (optional); Sticky notes (optional); Markers (optional); Training Guidebook

Training Facilitator Notes:

- Pause the video at 9:11 for a review of how to create a covenant.
- Ask the cohort to break into groups of 2-3.
- Ask for a volunteer to be the timekeeper. Each person should receive 5 minutes to share within the smaller group.
- Offer this prompt to the groups before they begin:
 - What would you include in a covenant for your group to help create a safe environment and recognize the dignity of each person?
 - What promises would the group like to make to each other and to God?
- Each smaller group could use sticky notes, poster paper, and markers to record its covenant elements, if desired. Also, they may refer to *Concept Review: Small Group Covenant* and *Suggested Steps for Creating a Small Group Covenant* if helpful.
- After everyone has shared within their smaller groups, take a moment to reflect as the larger cohort. (Spend a maximum of 5 minutes on this.)
 - What covenant elements did you hear that you found particularly meaningful?
 - What did you learn that you can use in your small group covenants?
 - What patterns did you notice in your covenants? Similarities? Differences?
- Once the group has finished sharing, resume and finish the Session 2 Training Video.

Individual Option

Take some time to consider the questions posed in the practice.

- What would you include in a covenant for your group to help create a safe environment and recognize the dignity of each person?

- What promises would the group like to make to each other and to God?

Consider finding a friend or mentor to share answers with, or write about it in a journal.



Concept Review: Small Group Covenant

A covenant is a “formal, solemn, and binding agreement” that helps us to lay the foundation for healthy relationships. Developing a small group covenant early on helps everyone in the group to start from the same place of understanding and respect. When we take the time to share practices that help us communicate with intention and mutuality, we can more safely move from our heads to our hearts. And centering our group in the love of Jesus lets us grow relationally and spiritually.

Covenants also help the group to hold one another accountable without shame or personalizing. Suppose a group has established and agreed on expectations about being on time or listening to each other. In that case, it’s much easier to invite a member who shows up late or takes up lots of conversational space to return to the norms established in the covenant.

Equipped with the covenant, facilitators should feel empowered to reference the group’s norms if a behavior becomes a distraction. “The group decided that we would not be texting during the session. Is this an emergency?” or “Remember, it’s our policy not to interrupt others while they are talking. Please wait for her to finish.” If the group or one member consistently breaks the norms, the facilitator may find it helpful to revisit the covenant with the group. The group may decide to keep or change the norms.

To create a meaningful experience, members should commit to making the group a priority for all sessions, recognizing that their participation will significantly impact their lives and the lives of the other group members.

Be upfront about expectations in communications – written and personal. Small groups function best with consistent participation, so be clear that you depend on the members to participate consistently. Include this in the group norms or covenant.

Check-out and Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Invite group members to share one word about the time you've spent together. Then end with a prayer.

Suggested Steps for Creating a Small Group Covenant

Step 1: The first time a group meets, the group leader should help the group to create a covenant together. Ask people to think of respectful ways to treat each other.

- What would help create a safe environment?
- What recognizes the dignity of each person?
- What promises would the group like to make to each other and to God?

Once the group has arrived at a shared set of promises, invite them to agree – perhaps actually saying “amen” – to what they've created. See more detailed tips and covenant examples on [page 21](#) of this guidebook.

Step 2: Decide on the best way to revisit the norms each session. Some groups prefer to post the norms outlined in their covenant clearly in their meeting space on a poster or whiteboard, or the chat box if online. Others reread the norms each week as they begin their time together. Other groups are much more informal, and members simply keep a copy on their phone or a printed copy in their Bible or prayer book. Regardless of how a group shares a covenant, everyone needs to have the same expectations about their time together and access to the promises they made.

Step 3: Treat the covenant like a living document, and change it as necessary. If you find that some of the elements of the covenant hinder your group or are redundant, remove them. If you find new elements that need to be embraced, add them to your covenant.

Make It Yours Home Engagement Options

Below you will find some additional practices, resources, and concepts for forming, leading, and sustaining intentional small groups. We hope you will take the time to consider these resources and then discuss them – or your experiences – with others in your cohort as you are able. Please continue to care for your spiritual health with the tools mentioned in Session I’s *Make It Yours Home Engagement Options*.

Option 1

Watch the Video: *Intentional Small Group FAQs*

The purpose of an intentional faith-based small group is to build trusting relationships with God and one another. When we meet each other for conversation, practice, and prayer, we learn how to love. However, for some communities, the idea of small groups might challenge some existing concerns or assumptions. To help address these concerns, we suggest watching and sharing the video, *Intentional Small Group FAQs*. Scan this code to access *Intentional Small Group FAQs*.



Option 2

Continue to Practice the Way of Love

Peruse the “Living the Way of Love in Community” curriculum for scripture, prayers, questions, and more content for your personal practice. Use these lessons for yourself, and feel free to bring some of the prayers and questions to your small group sessions.

https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/living_the_wol_in_community_english.pdf

Option 3

Explore (or Continue with) My Way of Love

As you seek to take care of your own spiritual health, consider **My Way of Love**. This Spiritual Life Inventory is more than a quiz; it’s a personal guide for the spiritual journey, providing coaching to help individuals grow along the [seven practices for Jesus-centered life](#): Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. It begins with a brief online survey to assess where you are in your spiritual life.

Once your responses have been processed, you will receive an email with a helpful explanation of the findings, along with some tips for improving your spiritual journey. You’ll also be given a chance to sign up for an eight-week series of emails that will offer some suggestions, coaching for growing spiritually, and ways for going deeper in love of God and neighbor.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love/my-way-of-love/>

Additional Leadership Tips and Resources

Here are some key tips taken from our larger resource, *Building Intentional Small Groups*. Potential small group leaders and hosts are encouraged to spend some time reviewing this section.

Introduction to Small Group Logistics

Two basic tenets of adult education:

1. Adults learn best when they are involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Adults are most motivated to learn when the subject has immediate impact and relevance on their lives.

We design intentional small groups to have lots of input from group members about the timing and location of meetings, food, prayers, and more. Even when your small group series offers specific themes and scripture as content, intentional small groups provide lots of ways to lead from within the group.

Jesus was onto something: 12 is about the perfect upper-end number for a small group. You can get away with 8-14 people, though. With fewer than 8 and any absences, the group is too small. More than 14 and there are too many people to have a single in-depth conversation. The following tips will help you begin – or continue – your small group ministry with confidence.

Helpful Tips for Creating Intentional Small Groups from Scratch

Tip 1: Offer a sign-up for the ministry, not for specific groups, to avoid an accidental popularity contest between hosts (something that happens when folks know some group leaders better than others).

Tip 2: Create a sign-up form that allows members to show their interest in being in an intentional small group. If you have several people who want to be part of a small group, continue group sorting.

Tip 3: Invite reluctant members to participate. Personal invitations go a long way to forming a meaningful small group. Be upfront about the group's commitments when you ask people to join, so they know what to expect. Small groups function best with consistent participation, so be clear that you depend on the members to participate consistently.

Tip 4: Leaders should sort members into groups considering these factors:

- **Location** – Often, it is nice to have groups of folks who live nearby, as this fosters ease of meeting and familiarity of routine.
- **Demographics** – We strongly recommend a mixture of ages and backgrounds whenever possible.

- **Rule of 2** – Pay careful attention that no one is alone in the group in regard to demographics. For example, avoid placing one single person in a group of couples or one retired person in a group of 20-somethings. Instead, at a minimum, make sure everyone has a buddy. Remember, we are attempting to remove aloneness, not create it.
- **Consider couples** – When multiple couples are in a group, it can be better to have a larger group because couples tend to be absent together, and some will have less to say because they often function as one unit. When appropriate, couples should feel free to join separate groups.

About Digital Gatherings

Deep spiritual intimacy does occur in online small group gatherings. Meeting online is an excellent option in periods of physical distancing or when gathering is prohibitive due to proximity, such as diocesan or regional meetings. Here are some suggestions on how to maximize connection during online meetings:

- Invite group members to wear comfortable clothes, dressing more for going to a picnic rather than to a board meeting or even to church.
- Encourage members to bring beverages and snacks to the meeting or even share a meal, just as you would if meeting in a home.
- Add more time around the beginning check-in and ending check-out with basic questions like “How are you arriving?” and “What are you taking with you?”
- Host “show and tell” moments to help members get to know each other better.
- Encourage members to bring along tactile activities like knitting or crochet projects, coloring books, or other art projects, as well as pets.

Expanding the Concept: Covenant Guidelines and Examples

How You Begin Matters

All groups should discuss these issues when they begin meeting.

- **Confidentiality:** What can we share outside the group? What can we share on social media? Most groups maintain a rule that the only appropriate content to share is your own – in other words, don’t share about group members or their stories without their permission.
- **Respect:** How will group members respect each other during their conversations?
- **Technology:** What is the phone policy? Will phones be turned off? Placed in the middle of the table? Or is casual use acceptable?
- **Logistics:** What are expectations about arriving on time? About providing or sharing food? About consuming alcohol during a gathering? Do members of the group have food restrictions?

- **Session preparation:** What, if anything, are group members supposed to do to prepare before the meeting each week? How is that communicated?

This set of **Respectful Communication Guidelines** from the Kaleidoscope Institute is an excellent place to begin when crafting norms as a group:

R - take **RESPONSIBILITY** for what you say and feel without blaming others.

E - use **EMPATHETIC** listening.

S - be **SENSITIVE** to differences in communication styles.

P - **PONDER** what you hear and feel before you speak.

E - **EXAMINE** your own assumptions and perceptions.

C - keep **CONFIDENTIALITY**. Only share your own stories.

T - **TRUST** ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

Sample Covenant

This is a sample covenant from the Becoming Beloved Community ministry in the Diocese of Southern Ohio:

- We assume that the Circle can hold all of us, as we are. God is at the center.
- We speak in “I” Statements.
- We don’t assume “we all know.”
- We listen to understand rather than to respond.
- W.A.I.T. - Why am/aren’t I talking? We strive for equitable air time in small groups.
- We allow for silence and space to digest.
- We share for the sake of learning and connecting instead of being right.
- We trust we won’t be quoted outside the group. Our stories are ours to tell.
- Each person is an expert in their own experience. Our job is not to fix, advise, rescue, or save anyone without consent.
- We pay attention to our bodies. If we have a response, we will breathe and choose curiosity before reacting.
- We acknowledge growth; we do not freeze ourselves or one another in time.
- We practice forgiveness: we forgive ourselves and one another with grace, as God has forgiven us.
- We strive to speak and act with intention as followers of Christ, with respect for ourselves and others, and with consideration for our words and actions’ impacts on all of God’s children, inside and outside of our Circle.
- We practice the Way of Love: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest as part of the four-fold path of Becoming Beloved Community.

Session 3: Leading Centered

Session Learning Goals

Session 3 is specifically geared toward leaders of *Centered: A Christian Discipleship Experience*. *Centered* is a discipleship series guiding small, gathered communities to get deeply rooted in love with God and one another, so that we all may grow to look, act, and love more like Jesus. The experience consists of nine core sessions during which church members, neighbors, and friends gather to share a meal and grateful prayer; watch a short film and discuss related questions about God, belonging, and living a meaningful life; and support each other in committing to intentionally follow Jesus and his Way of Love. This portion of the Intentional Small Group Leader Training will build on the previous two sessions to help prepare training participants to be *Centered* facilitators.

Training Facilitator Note: Please watch the video and read over the guidebook before your cohort meets. If someone wants to talk about an aspect of the guidebook information in more detail, and the group agrees, follow the energy of your group.

Suggested Session 3 Outline

Welcome and Opening Prayer (3 minutes)

Open your time together with a welcome, an offer of gratitude for everyone's presence, and a [prayer](#). You can choose one of your own, or use the QR code to find options from Forward Movement.



Meal (20 minutes)

If you are eating together, enjoy your meal. Remember – don't rush to eat, and be mindful of time while allowing space for fellowship and continued community building. After 15 minutes to serve and settle in, you can shift gears and begin to prepare the group to watch the video.

Content Engagement – Video and Exercises (40 minutes)

Watch the Session 3 Training Video together. Notice the prompts in the video, and follow those directions as you are able. *Note:* You will need to pause the video after the Practice exercise is explained.

Practice: Check-ins

If you're not in a circle or on Zoom, now is the time to create a space where you can all see each other's faces. Ask the question of your group, and divide into pairs or groups of three. Give five minutes per person, so pairs will need 10 minutes, groups of three will need 15 minutes. If you're doing this training on your own, write your responses.

Time: 15 minutes

Learning Process: Cohort members learn, or refresh their knowledge of, the practices of good small group facilitation, Mutual Invitation, and the use of a talking piece.

Supplies: Timer; Talking piece – a rock, small cross, or other icon that fits comfortably in the palm of a hand and invokes peace (This piece can change with each check-in or it can remain the same. If online, encourage people to bring their own talking piece to hold.); Training Guidebook

Training Facilitator Notes:

- Pause the video at 11:53.
- Show the group the object you have chosen to be your **talking piece** (as explained in Session 1) for the sake of the exercise. If online, ask all members to hold up their talking piece and share visually with the group.
- Invite each other to speak, practicing **Mutual Invitation** as outlined in Session 1.

- Check-in prompt: “Where did you meet God most fully or profoundly in the last week?”
- Make sure to pass (or visually share) the talking piece as each person is invited to share.
- After you have completed your check-ins, resume the video, and then continue to the **Additional Content Engagement** section below.

Individual Option

Spend some time reflecting on these questions, either in a journal or with a friend or partner:

- When has someone’s invitation to “check in” made a difference in your life? How did it make you feel?
- Where did you meet God most fully or profoundly in the last week?
- Who could you invite to check in this week using this prompt?

Additional Content Engagement

Congratulations! You have now completed the bulk of **Intentional Small Group Leader Training!**

For the next step, we encourage you to spend some time as a group addressing questions, logistics, and tasks related to how you will launch and lead this initiative within your context.

To begin, consider reviewing *Preparing for Centered: A Checklist* (below) or any of the *Additional Leadership Tips and Resources* found at the end of each session in the guidebook.

Ultimately, the remaining time in this session is for your benefit, so use it in whichever way it will best serve your group.

Preparing for Centered: A Checklist

Before your first *Centered* gathering, here is a checklist of tasks to help you prepare to lead and host effectively.

- **Set Your Timeline:** The timeline for a *Centered* small group is nine sessions. After nine sessions, groups could re-form or continue. Honoring the Way of Love practice of Rest is important; pause your groups when a break is needed. We recommend weekly meetings for a *Centered* small group, but the ideal time is what works for the people in your group. Each session of *Centered* is focused on Jesus and rooted in scripture, particularly the words and actions of Jesus. We recommend proceeding with the same group members from beginning to end. If you choose to continue meeting after the nine-week session, you might consider allowing new members to join. Or, members of

your group might want to lead a *Centered* group at a different time and start a new group. Many of us are in more than one small group, sometimes showing up as a group host, sometimes as a participant, sometimes as a co-host.

- **Review Building Intentional Small Groups:** This resource is an essential tool when beginning any small group ministry. If you have not already read or reviewed this guide, please do so before beginning your groups.
- **Review the Group Leaders' Guidebook for Sessions 1-9:** You may choose to review each session one week ahead of time or all at once, but please take the time to become familiar with each session's outline, practices, Make It Yours home engagement prompts, and bonus resources.
- **Review the Videos:** It will be helpful for you to review the videos ahead of time, becoming comfortable with the content and the web interface. You may download or stream the videos, both options are available. If your group is meeting over Zoom, you may wish to send a link to Video A for each session to your group ahead of each meeting in order to save time.
- **Review the Participant Guidebook:** You may choose to review each session one week ahead of time, or all at once, but please take the time to become familiar with the additional options for learning and reflection presented in the Participant Guidebook. You are also encouraged to do these exercises yourself as a spiritual practice.
- **Connect with Your Group:** It is often helpful to send weekly prayers, reminders, and resources to your group members, especially in the beginning of your time together and toward the end when attendance might begin to slow down. Remind your group members that their presence and participation are gifts that help the whole group to flourish. You might want to begin by sending each a handwritten note on a *Centered* postcard (available at <http://iam.ec/centered>).
- **Watch and Share the Centered Trailer:** Watch and then share the trailer for *Centered: A Christian Discipleship Experience* with your group and your congregation. It is a wonderful tool for promoting this small group ministry.
- **Review Centered Webpages:** Many resources can be found at <http://iam.ec/centered>. Take time to review these additional assets and consider how they can support your *Centered* experience.

Check-out and Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Invite group members to share one word about the time you've spent together over these three sessions. Then end with a prayer.

Make It Yours Home Engagement Options

Option 1

Create and/or Maintain Your Rule of Life

We talked in Session 1 about the importance of a rule of life. Have you created yours yet? Or are you still thinking and praying about it? [Living Intentionally: A Workbook for Creating a Personal Rule of Life](#) by Br. David Vryhof of the Society of St. John the Evangelist will get you to your goal of creating your own rule. This workbook will guide you through questions with lots of space to write your answers. Your answers to the questions will help you organize your personal rule. It's YOUR rule, meaning you make the rules that will help you follow Jesus more closely and in the ways that fit you and your life.

Option 2

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Additional Leadership Tips and Resources

Review the Centered Sessions Outline

Below is an overview of the themes covered in the nine sessions. Small group members are encouraged to explore these themes both during their group time and on their own between sessions using the Participant Guidebook.

Part I: Living and Sharing Jesus-Centered Life (Sessions 1-3)

In the first three sessions, we practice being together while learning from the life of Jesus.

Session 1: Meeting Jesus and Each Other - This session asks, *Who is Jesus Christ and why does he matter? And what's love got to do with it?*

Session 2: Meeting Jesus and Sharing Life in Small Groups - This session explores meeting Jesus and sharing life in small groups. Jesus gathered his disciples into a group of followers. We also flourish when we follow him as part of a small intentional community in which we experience belonging to God and to each other.

Session 3: Following Jesus as a Way of Life - This session is about practicing whole-life discipleship, that is, living and loving like Jesus in every part of our lives – not just on Sundays, but for our whole lifetime.

Part II: Forming Loving Relationships with God, Neighbors, Fellow Disciples, and Ourselves (Sessions 4-7)

In the next four sessions, we move into the heart of the journey. Following the pattern of the Great Commandment, Sessions 4-7 explore how Jesus loved God, his neighbors, his disciples, and himself. What does he show us about how we also can develop loving relationships with God, our neighbors, our fellow disciples, and ourselves?

Session 4: Loving God Like Jesus Does - In this session, we explore what we can learn from Jesus' intimate, trusting relationship with God, his "Abba" (father) God, which was fostered through praying and turning again and again to God.

Session 5: Loving Neighbors and Strangers Like Jesus Does - This session is about loving neighbors and strangers the way Jesus loved them. Jesus had a heart full of compassion for everyone he met, and that flowed out in healing, feeding, listening, humbly serving all, and seeking justice for the most vulnerable.

Session 6: Loving Other Disciples Like Jesus Does - This session explores how we can love other Christians and followers of Jesus the way Jesus did: Jesus loved his friends and washed their feet, and he invited them to tend, respect, forgive, and ultimately

LOVE one another. He shows us how to be in relationship and partnership with fellow disciples.

Session 7: Loving Ourselves Like Jesus Does - In this session, we explore how we can love ourselves the way Jesus loved himself: Jesus began his ministry hearing God proclaim him as “Beloved.” Imagine if we saw and understood ourselves as Beloved and honored our own and others’ belovedness?

Part III: Grow in Love: Living an Intentional Life with God – Together
(Sessions 8-9)

Following Jesus takes intentionality and practice (one reason why the words “disciple” and “discipline” are so close). That’s why we need an intentional pathway like a rule of life *and* a community with which to live it out.

Session 8: Creating a Sustainable Rule of Life - This session focuses on creating a sustainable rule of life. Following Jesus takes intentionality and practice (that’s one reason why the words “disciple” and “discipline” are so close). That’s why we need a rule of life and a community with which to live it out.

Session 9: Looking and Acting Like Jesus – Together - In this session we gather, covenant, and commit to support and bless each other in the power of the Spirit. It’s the only way we can hope to live and love like Jesus in everyday life.

In all nine sessions, you will explore provocative questions and join in deep learning and sharing. Relationships will grow deeper as people learn to listen deeply to each other and to God’s voice in their midst.

Prepare Your Heart to Lead

Just what does it take to be an effective leader in a small group ministry? What skills are needed? Well, it turns out there are several roles involved in the success of a small group. When we think about what is important in a small group, it’s less about the content and more about people connecting with each other, with God, and with themselves.

The ability to hold space and facilitate conversation that allows people to carry the feeling of belonging through the week or month until the next meeting is, primarily, not something that can be taught. But there are elements of small group meetings that, if prepared ahead of time, make the sessions feel effortless and allow for focus on the experience of being together versus making sure your content is engaging and thought-provoking.

The central reason for participating in a small group is to create a space for people to be themselves, together, to exist exactly as they are and know they are complete, seen, heard, and known. We’re creating space to belong. It’s OK for things to be messy and imperfect, as it

was with Jesus' disciples. But there are things you can do to keep the conversation flowing and the relationships deepening.