

First Gathering of a Discipling Community

How to be prepared and what to do



As you prepare to gather as a Discipling Community, you may be wondering how to do the first meeting. The first time together, especially if there is little or no prior relationship, can be a productive and formative time. Here's how you can approach it:

1) Pray

Time spent in prayer is time well spent. Ask God's blessing on the group and for each person who will be a part of it. Pray by name for those you already know are coming. Pray for others who could come that you may not know about. Pray everyone will show up (the first time can be intimidating) and that the meeting will go well.

2) Prepare

This may seem obvious, but prepare the place where you will be meeting. Make sure there is a seat for everyone, plus extras, and that it is in the general shape of a circle. This facilitates eye contact and conversation. Make sure the temperature is comfortable and that the lighting is adequate. It doesn't have to be so bright that people need sunglasses, but shouldn't be so dark that they can't see each other or their Bible/materials (or want to nap).

In addition, make a personal contact with the people you know will be coming in the days ahead. This will help them to remember, and to know that you are excited about their participation. If you already have a developing leader, include him/her in making contacts. One thing that can help people to follow through in showing up is if you ask them to bring something.

3) Greet at the Door

As people start arriving¹, whether to a home or a room at church, meet the group members at the door. Say hello and welcome them. Greet them warmly. You may even want to consider having nametags if everyone doesn't know everyone else. (And don't assume that they do.) You will likely get to the point in the Discipling Community where everyone is comfortable, but that's not where things start.

4) Have the Gathering

Start off the first gathering "informally." Allow people to mingle, enjoy the food and drink², and begin to connect. About 20 minutes after the "official" start time, have people circle up. Spend time getting to know one another more intentionally. You can use an "icebreaker." For example, have every share what concert they would attend and why if they had access to unlimited money, tickets, and a time machine.

Spend some time laying the groundwork for the Discipling Community including the purpose and expectations. Ask people to share why they have come. The focus of the first meeting is primarily building connection and relationships. Don't worry about diving deep into the study aspect.

Plan to spend time reviewing the *Disciple-making Framework* (connect, grow, engage) and the *Core Competencies*. Talk about what a healthy Discipling Community focuses on and the *6 Member Values*. Cast vision that outreach, growth, and eventually multiplication/birthing is a core value. Don't forget to make sure everyone is on the same page regarding meeting time, frequency, location, etc. If you will be sharing responsibilities, now is a good time to set that in motion (i.e. hosting, facilitating, etc).

Finally, end with prayer. Praying for one another is part of building and being in community as disciples, but being the first meeting, you don't want this to become awkward. You could say, "Hey, we're going to close in prayer, but please don't feel the pressure to share anything. If you want prayer, mention it, and someone will volunteer to pray out loud for you in a moment." You don't have to do prayer this way all the time, but it does begin to build community and comfort among members.

5) Honor the Time Commitment

This may seem counterintuitive, but it is important. If you say the gathering will end at 8pm, then end the "official" group time at 8pm. You can certainly welcome (even encourage if you want) people to stay and chat, but this also allows those who need to go to leave without feeling awkward or that they are missing something. This also shows respect to those who may be providing childcare (if that's part of your group dynamic).

One More Thing...

Follow up with people in the days between your first meeting and the next one. Let them know you're glad they are part of the group and encourage them. This can help to cement them into the group.

There you go. Hopefully this framework will set you and the group up for a fruitful and successful time together as a Discipling Community that connects, grows, and engages. May the Lord bless you as you facilitate.

¹ If meeting at a home, be sure to provide a map/directions/address ahead of time so people can easily get there.

² One other thing, don't be afraid to have the snacks out at the beginning of the meeting. There is no need to wait until the end. In fact, having them available at the beginning breaks down some of the initial awkwardness as people arrive and begin to engage in conversations.