



SMALL GROUPS FIELD GUIDE

CATHOLIC CAMPUS MINISTRY ASSOCIATION





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INTRODUCTION

Small student faith-sharing groups are increasingly common on college campuses and many campus ministries place them in the center of all that they do. Some campuses call them Christian Life Communities while others refer to them simply as small groups. Whatever the name, this field guide will explain why so many Catholic campus ministry programs are using small groups with great results.

Overview

This field guide is designed for the campus ministry program that wants to **begin** using small groups. It may also be helpful for the campuses that already offer small groups but can **benefit** from a refresher.

First, in **Chapter 1** we'll define terms like "small groups" and distinguish between a small group and a Bible study. From there, in **Chapter 2** we ask, "what's the point?" In other words, if small groups are simply opportunities for young people to gather and hang out, couldn't they do that in another setting? Small groups, especially in a Catholic campus ministry setting, are much more than just opportunities to socialize.

What do small groups look like on different campuses? How small is too small? How often should they meet? These questions and more are explored in **Chapter 3**. **Chapter 4** examines the places that small groups can lead such as a greater expression of prayer and service.

Finally in **Chapter 5**, we look at the resources and next steps available to you related to small groups. Should you utilize an outside ministry to help? Should you launch small groups in the next six months?

We hope that you find this field guide to be helpful as you continue to reach students for Christ and the Church,



Michael St. Pierre, Ed.D.
Executive Director | CCMA

A welcome message from Michael St. Pierre, Executive Director of CCMA





Defining Terms

All in a Name

Small groups are known by many terms within the context of Catholic campus ministry. They are known around the country as:

- *Small Groups*
- *Christian Life Groups*
- *Christian Life Communities*
- *Cell Groups*
- *Small Christian Communities*
- *Campus Small Groups*
- *Student Groups*

One university describes their approach to small groups as a point of connection, enabling students to "bond, pray and explore our faith and vocations". Another university explains small groups as a **"great way to grow deeper in your relationship with God and others who share your Catholic faith"**. Often described as a way to make college "feel smaller", student groups forge deep bonds for students who can otherwise become anonymous.

One mid-west university describes their approach to small groups as having three pillars: spirituality, community and mission. Through weekly meetings, students gather to pray, talk and explore "where they have found



God in their lives". Often, in Jesuit institutions, the concept of finding God "in all things" takes expression in small groups. By inviting students to reflect on God's presence in everyday life, their busy schedules find spiritual grounding.

Another university makes a direct link between personal discipleship with Christ and the small group: "Small groups are a great way to get to know Jesus while gaining relationships with other students." The focus on encountering Christ via small groups is essential and avoids what some call "bellybutton-gazing".

Some campus ministries place particular focus on discernment within small groups. This serves two purposes. First, it reminds students of their higher call as disciples of Christ. Second, it eases the transition to life after college. One university uses small groups to "help young adults learn how to make decisions according to God's will."



"Campus ministry is an expression of the Church's special desire to be present to all who are involved in higher education."

US Bishops, *Empowered by the Spirit*



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WHAT'S THE POINT OF SMALL GROUPS?

Are small groups meant for studying the Bible? Do they facilitate discussions of faith? Can they prepare students for the upcoming Sunday Mass? Or, are they similar to support groups? One's perspective on the purpose of small groups will shape the answers to these questions. This chapter will bring clarity to the simple question that begins our journey- what's the point?

The Point of Small Groups



Two Purposes

Small groups often serve two vital purposes within campus ministry:

- 1. Small groups act as an entry point to the campus ministry program.**
- 2. Small groups provide a “discipleship path” for students that enables them to grow and deepen their relationship with Christ.**

Small groups, when understood this way, are much more important than just another program to offer. Rather, they have the potential to supercharge campus ministry such that students are continually "entering" campus ministry and maturing in their relationship with Christ.



Tom Corcoran on the Difficulty of Small Groups

Tom is the Associate to the Pastor at the Church of the Nativity in Timonium, MD.



It can be tempting, through no fault of any one person, for a campus ministry program to become insular. One campus minister put it this way, "I'm just happy if students show up for events." As students participate in events, we gain a certain satisfaction and a sense that our work is paying off. Students "showing up" can become the only measure of success.

This is a natural posture. Those serving in parishes can relate to this as well. If people show up on Sundays for Mass, that's certainly a good thing. *The catch is that it's not the only thing.*

For campus ministry programs to excel, it is imperative to "onboard" students regularly. This can take the form of a start-of-the-year cookout or a free concert. Small groups can also serve this purpose. Through regular invitations to join small groups, campus ministers keep the doors open for new students to take another step in their discipleship and faith.

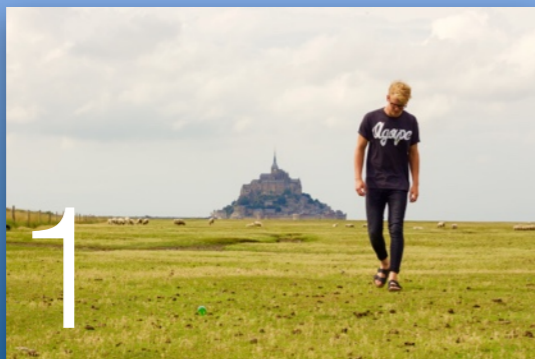
Small groups also provide a practical way to help students mature in their faith. The weekly Mass experience can accomplish this but the environment is much larger and depends heavily on the quality of the preaching. Small groups are more manageable and get students talking. They provide accountability and tap into how many young adults learn.



"Lonely voices on campus cry out for intimacy, and mildly estranged individuals express a desire for more personal interaction."

US Bishops, Empowered by the Spirit

Starting out



Making progress



Making disciples



Click on
each photo

Three Tiers of Small Groups

Whether your campus ministry is promoting small groups or barely getting traction with them, there are three common stages of growth. These stages can be temporary or persist for several years.

Tier One: Small groups are not yet meeting but the campus ministry program has a desire to offer these in the future. A campus ministry may be in Tier One because of:

- Too many other programs in place.
- Not enough training on how to run small groups.
- A feeling that the staff is already stretched too thin.

Many times, campus ministry programs in Tier One feel as if small groups are just “one more thing” to coordinate. Even still, they know that small groups work but just can’t seem to fit them into everything else that they currently offer. This can be due to an incomplete understanding of the value of small groups or due to a lack of planning.

Tier Two: Small groups are currently meeting but there isn’t a plan for what comes next. Campus ministry programs in this tier have made some commitment to small groups but aren’t totally sure what level of prominence small groups should play in the life of the ministry. *Should every student be in a small group? Should we “push” small groups? What if I don’t have enough strong leaders to facilitate small groups?* These questions and more are very common.

Tier Three: Small groups are meeting and going according to plan. Students are moving along a discipleship path and inviting new students into groups. Evangelization and conversion are taking place. Campus ministries may be here for any number of reasons:

- As a result of dynamic leadership.
- Ample staffing to help student leaders.

Wherever you are on this scale, the key is to move your ministry a bit further. We are looking for progress, not perfection. Even for a Tier Three program, there is plenty of room for growth.



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WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

At Drew University in New Jersey, small groups look different from those at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. Whether you look at Catholic institutions, public universities or commuter colleges, no two small groups are alike. With that said, there are a few elements that nearly all small groups have in common.

The Look of Small Groups



No Two Are the Same

No two small groups are the same. By their nature, they aspire to be intimate, giving a campus ministry program a vehicle to make the Church feel *small*. Here are some common elements of small group initiatives around the country:

Size

Small groups typically do not grow larger than 7-9 participants. The thinking is that bigger than nine becomes hard to manage. If one person cannot make the meeting time, you still have five participants which can make for a dynamic and fruitful conversation. If a group is growing, it may be time to split it into two separate groups. This would then require a second facilitator. While the exact size of a group isn't etched in stone, a general rule is this: if it feels too big, it probably is.

Frequency

Most ministry programs suggest that groups meet once per week. Less frequently than once a week can leave students feeling disconnected. The value of a weekly gathering is that of training the muscle of small group accountability. By offering small groups weekly, students begin to crave the community they enjoy



“Faith makes us open to the quiet presence of God at every moment of our lives, in every person and in every situation.”

Pope Francis



AUDIO: listen to Mike St. Pierre talk with Julie Rose about gender and its impact on groups.



through a small group. The frequency makes it easy to remember and more effective in terms of building community.

Gender


Once again, campus programs differ in terms of their philosophy towards male-female small groups. The argument for single-gender groups is that they encourage more discussion on a very frank level. Along those lines, some campuses feel that men and women open up more often to other those of the same gender, relating to one another on a deeper level than in a coeducational setting. On the other hand, some campuses find value in mixed-gender small groups. The argument in favor of coeducational groups is found in an appreciation for the faith perspective of someone from another gender. Whichever approach you choose, you'll want to think this through before launching small groups. What works on one campus might be different from the next.

Undergraduate or Graduate?

There appears to be less diversity in this regard. Most campuses encourage small groups for their undergrads and separate groups for their graduate students. At least one campus with an extensive small group program offers freshmen-only groups followed by sophomore-senior groups. The thought is that freshmen have unique issues and challenges that other students do not have.

Location

The location of a small group is quite important. Sometimes the easiest place for a small group to meet is the Catholic center, the



“The call to form communities of faith flows both from the very nature of the Gospel itself and from the pastoral situation on campus. Christianity is ecclesial by its very nature.”

US Bishops, *Empowered by the Spirit*

Newman Center or the Campus Ministry office. Typically, these locations have couches and small settings for quiet conversations.

Small groups do not have to be limited to "churchy" locations. They can take place in dorms, outdoors or even in the student center. Some campuses deliberately train their small group leaders to meet in locations that might be seen as "ordinary" such as a dorm or in a dining hall. This demonstrates a belief that Christians are the church and apply the words of Christ to their entire campus, "Wherever two or more are gathered, there I am in their midst." (Matthew 18:20)

Lectionary-based

As Catholics are familiar with the weekly rhythm of the Lectionary via Sunday Mass readings, many campuses utilize the Lectionary for small groups. This provides a "ready-made" curriculum to draw from as the Gospel reading in particular is a perfect sized snippet of text on which students can reflect. The upside of a Lectionary-based approach to small groups is that Catholics are already familiar with it and the Lectionary provides more than enough material with which to work.

Another advantage of a Lectionary-based approach is the low barrier of entry. Catholics are familiar with how the readings are integrated into worship so talking about the readings prior to a Sunday Mass is an effective way to connect "Sunday with Monday".

A Lectionary-based approach is also quite affordable. No special books or materials are needed, just the Sunday Gospel reading. Our list of resources at the end of this Field Guide provide a number of user-friendly tools for a Lectionary-based approach to small groups.

Curriculum-based

Instead of a Lectionary-based approach to small group discussion content, some campuses prefer to use a set curriculum. This may come in the form of a booklet or even through video. The advantage of a curriculum-based model is that it can be topical, allowing groups to delve deep into one particular issue. A disadvantage is that the group can feel reliant on the "book", detracting from the organic vibe of a small group's maturation and spiritual development.



Are Small Groups the Same as a Bible Study?

Some people equate small groups with Bible studies. A Bible study can occur within a small group (and often does) but small groups, by our definition, are more than Bible studies. While a Bible study is often focused on “covering material”, small groups are about making disciples in the context of a small community.

Format

Small groups run from 1-1.5 hours each week. A typical format often includes:

- Opening prayer: student facilitator
- Recap of the week: group
- Short reading: student (BIBLE?)
- Discussion: group, led by the student facilitator
- Prayer intentions & pastoral needs: group

Food is a “secret weapon” of any successful small group. Having snacks to offer at the beginning of small groups (or at the conclusion) helps to break the ice and make everyone feel welcome.



“Christianity is not a set of private convictions that we cultivate inwardly or whisper among ourselves. It is the message that the whole world needs to hear. We who have heard it must become agents of subversion and transformation.”

–Bishop Robert Barron

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's legs and feet. They are wearing bright orange and blue sneakers with white soles. The person is standing on a set of concrete steps. The background is a textured, grey concrete wall. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

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WHERE CAN SMALL GROUPS LEAD?

Small groups lead students to deeper friendship with Christ, to friendship among its members and to a love of serving the poor. With the Holy Spirit as one's guide, small groups can be a powerful launching point for greater missionary discipleship.

A Means to an End

Small groups are a means to an end. While this may be obvious, there is a temptation for campuses to see certain aspects of ministry as an end *in and of itself*. Often, you'll see this with retreats. You can spot this mindset when someone says, "We can't change the retreat talk outline. We've used that one for over a decade!" Really?

Small groups can fall into this trap too. We can be so consumed with the format and models that we use that we forget that they are a means to an end. When they become insular and self-focused, they

lose their impact. On the other hand, when small groups are running effectively, they can be a powerful vehicle for the Holy Spirit to impact lives and for campus ministry to flourish. With that said, how far can small groups go? To which ends can they lead? What follow are some of the dramatic effects of small groups.

Missionary Discipleship

Small groups encourage students to grow in their personal relationship with Christ. When one is actively growing in his relationship with Jesus, he is naturally drawn to share his faith with others and

"It is vitally important to go forth and spread the Gospel to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear."

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*



serve those in need. Students find themselves reading the Bible more often in between group meetings and praying on their own more consistently.

Authentic Friendship

Deep friendships can form as a result of small groups. Students begin to count on one another for encouragement and support. They "nudge" one another forward in faith, offering prayer support and personal example. Authentic friendship stands in stark contrast to the faux-friendship often promoted via social media. Instead of having

500 "Facebook friends", small groups provide members with 4, 5, or even 6 truly authentic friends that they can count on.

Pastoral Care

No campus ministry staff can minister effectively to the hundreds or thousands of students on a college campus. Through small groups, students learn to minister to one another, thus extending the "reach" of the campus ministry staff. When a student needs help or is going through a difficult time, it's often the members of the small group that minister most effectively to their peers.



“Friendship, as has been said, consists in a full commitment of the will to another person with a view to that person's good.”

Saint Pope John Paul II



"Love and charity, are service, helping others, serving others. When you forget yourself and think of others, this is love!"

Pope Francis

Service

Small groups can lead to greater expressions of service. A group may decide to participate together in a corporal act of mercy on a regular basis or spontaneously. Members of small groups encourage one another and share their stories of how the Lord is expanding their vision to include those most vulnerable and in the margins of society.

Retreats

Small groups are also a great way to promote upcoming events and invite other students to participate in retreats. Campus ministry programs find no lack of interest for retreats when a small group initiative is in place- a committed audience is always available. When a campus ministry program has small groups in place, their retreat program often has no trouble filling up.



“We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.”

Dorothy Day

Greater Connection to the Rest of Campus Ministry

Small groups can often form the glue of a campus ministry program. Communication can flow from the campus ministry program to small groups. Then, small group facilitators can “relay” back to campus ministry issues or needs that students have. Instead of relying on an email or a series of texts to communicate to students on campus, the campus ministry program can use its small group facilitators to share news of an upcoming event or ministry opportunity. A small group can also give the campus ministry program a vehicle for addressing difficult issues or campus scenarios that require more discussion than what a Sunday Mass homily can afford.

Social Events

Small groups also enable students to get together outside of the scheduled weekly meeting. This gives participants opportunities for fun and also moments to be with students who aren’t (yet) plugged into campus ministry.

Reflection on Church Teaching

Finally, small groups can equip students to have deeper reflection on Church teaching. When a group is discussing a tough issue, there’s no better reference than Church teaching. A skilled student facilitator can help a group connect daily life with the teachings of the Church.



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RESOURCES

Chapter 5 provides resources for getting going with small groups. Whether your campus already uses small groups or needs a jumpstart to take them to the next level, this chapter provides you with a toolbox that you can take with you after you've finished studying the Field Guide.

“To live is to change,
and to be perfect is to
have changed often.”

Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman

- [USCCB Daily Mass](#) Readings & Reflections
- [USCCB Campus Small Groups Resources](#)
- [USCCB App](#)
- [CCMA App](#)
- Ascension Press
 - [3 Quick Tips to Improve Your Small Groups](#)
 - [Ascension Presents Video Series with Fr. Mike Schmitz](#)
- [Renew International: CampusRenew](#)
- [Fruitful Discipleship: Living the Mission of Jesus in the Church and the World \(by Sherry Weddell\)](#)
- [St. Paul's Outreach](#)
- [Small Christian Communities International Website](#)
- America Magazine
 - [“When it Comes to Nurturing Faith, Smaller is Often Better”](#)
- Evangelical Catholic
 - [Why Small Groups](#) video
 - [Group Discussion Guides](#)
- [FOCUS Small Group Resources](#)
- [Steubenville Fuel](#) Small Group Resources



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