GATHERING AS “OIKOS” DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND

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As guidelines for lifting restrictions on gatherings seem to change almost weekly, we need to be prepared to facilitate community in a dynamic and flexible way.

Since it will most likely be some time before full participation in gatherings will be permitted, we need to think about how to begin to gather safely within the allowed parameters as the restrictions are incrementally lifted.

How do we do this? Think OIKOS.

The early church gathered in what the NT calls, oikos. This word meaning “household,” included the householder’s family, slaves, friends, neighbors, and even business associates. These pre-existing social networks, or “extended family,” were the primary way in which people came to faith and gathered to worship. The gatherings or ekklesia took place in homes, and the number of people who would gather was limited to how many people could fit inside the space of residence. Typically, these extended families were between 25 and 75 people… (Mike Breen, Launching Missional Communities, 2010)

- Since we cannot yet gather in full public celebrations, we need to create smaller groups within our congregations- “extended families,” or oikos, that will be able to gather sooner than our full congregations will be able to.
- These groups can begin to “meet” in a regular rhythm for community, support, encouragement and worship.
- These groups could function under all scenarios of restrictions (online, limited numbers, etc.) and provide a framework for gradually re-introducing our congregants to in-church meetings.

How many people should be in these groups? 10 people.

Here in California, the acceptability of groups of 10 came up during the closing of social gatherings, and could most likely be an acceptable number as we begin to gather again. 10 people can easily participate together in a zoom call, as well as fit in the living room of a home. If we are gradually going to be allowed to meet in smaller numbers within our church buildings, these groups of 10 can take turns worshipping “at church” while the other groups worship in homes or online in zoom or Facebook watch parties.

How do we create these groups? Start with leaders.

Each group of 10 will need a leader. Each leader will be the point-person to the clergy and help gather and nurture the group members. The leaders can be invited by clergy, or if someone feels a
particular call to leading or hosting a group, they should speak to their clergy. Once leaders are committed to lead, the congregation’s registrar or administrative personnel should assign congregants to each team.

Who should be a Leader? Use the “Four C’s”

- **Character**- Are they committed to Christ? Will they be accountable? Do they exhibit gifts of hospitality, other-centeredness, and generosity? Are they mission-aware or mission-focused?
- **Competency**- Do they have leadership experience or potential?
- **Chemistry**- Are they committed to your church and its leadership?
- **Capacity**- Can they commit to leadership, hosting, and guiding? Will others follow them?

Leaders should be encouraged and empowered to schedule and lead zoom gatherings, worship service watch parties, book studies, etc.

Once leaders are committed to leading, and members assigned to groups, the groups should begin meeting weekly, starting with Sunday gatherings in a mode that is guideline appropriate.

**SCENARIO 1: NO SOCIAL GATHERINGS PERMITTED.**

- Each group gathers virtually at a specific time on Sunday to watch a virtual church service either provided by their clergy (if they are doing online church) or with another designated congregation.
- The groups gather on zoom, watch the service together, and then stay online for a virtual coffee hour or fellowship time
- Clergy could take turns virtually “visiting” groups

**SCENARIO 2: GROUPS OF 10 ARE PERMITTED TO GATHER IN PERSON**

- The group meets in a home, on a Sunday and uses one of the attached rubrics (or something similar) for a structured worship/community gathering which could include:
  - Watching an online service together
  - Praying for one another
  - Check in- “how are we doing?”
  - A shared meal, either potluck or hosted (if this is allowed)

**SCENARIO 3: GROUPS OF 10-30 ARE PERMITTED TO MEET TOGETHER IN PERSON**
• The group could meet together in a home (it does not need to be the leader’s home) for a structured worship/community gathering (as above)

• At this point, Clergy may be able to allow one or more groups to gather in the church buildings for worship. Clergy can put together a rotation, ie:
  o 1st Sunday, group A can attend in person (while groups B, C, D meet in homes)
  o 2nd Sunday group B can attend in person (while groups A, C, D meet in homes)

SCENARIO 4: LARGER GROUPS ARE PERMITTED TO GATHER

• More groups could gather in the church buildings
  o 1st Sunday groups A, B can attend in person, which groups C, D meet in homes
  o 2nd Sunday, groups C, D can attend in person while groups A, B meet in homes, etc…

If situations change, and restrictions are once again tightened, the groups could take steps backwards- meeting again virtually, or only in homes.

By establishing this structure, or something like it, we will provide our congregants with

• Stability
  o Regular gatherings in predictable rhythms will provide a stable environment during uncertain times.

• Community
  o Regular communication, interaction, support, prayer, etc

• Vehicles for communication between clergy and lay
  o Group leaders could be liaisons to clergy if needed.

• Deeper relationships
  o New and deeper relationships could be forged during this time

• Discipleship opportunities
  o Leaders could be provided with ongoing training, support and discipleship by Canon for Evangelism and discipleship
  o Groups could engage in book studies, bible studies, meditation, prayer, etc.
  o Clergy could provide weekly reflection questions based on their sermons that small groups could discuss after the worship service

• Evangelism opportunities
  o As we are permitted to gather, group members could invite friends and neighbors to their watch parties or home gatherings.
RUBRICS FOR CHURCH OIKOS HOME GATHERINGS

Rubric 1: To participate in a 10am online worship service together

- 9:30am-10am – Gathering and greeting, coffee
  - Group check in- how is everybody doing?
  - Someone opens in prayer or invites group to center themselves silently
- 10am-11am- Stream a worship service and participate in it together
- 11am-12:30pm- Respond to service (choose 1 or more):
  - Members invited to answer 2 questions:
    - What is God saying to me?
      - In response to the scripture reading?
      - In response to the sermon?
      - In response to prayer or fellowship?
    - What am I going to do about it?
  - Break Bread together
    - Have a potluck brunch
    - Take a walk to a local park and have a picnic
- 12:30pm-12:45pm- Close in prayer, dismiss

Rubric 2: A Midweek Evening Gathering

- 6pm-630pm- Gathering, fellowship, light refreshments, dessert, or potluck dinner
- 630pm-700pm- Check in, connection time- how is everyone doing?
- 7:00pm-7:30pm- Check in followed by content: book study, Bible Study/reflection questions/ discussion time facilitated by leader.
- 7:30 pm-8pm- Prayer (one or more done together)
  - Pray Compline together from BCP, Intercessory prayer for one another
  - Meditation, silent prayer, centering prayer, group lectio divina, etc.
- 8pm- dismiss

For additional resources or assistance starting a Small Group ministry, please contact Canon Christian Gillette at cgillette@edsd.org