



Park Slope

Presbyterian Church

COMMUNITY GROUPS:

A LEADERS' MANUAL

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COMMUNITY GROUPS: A LEADER'S MANUAL

PART 1: INTRO & BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

The church is not a place to go, rather it is a people who go. Pastor and theologian Harvie Conn rightly identifies the church as a group of people gathered together by God to participate in his community together. If this is true, then the measure of a person's spiritual health can only be taken in the context of her relationships. The Christian life was never meant to be lived alone. Rather, throughout the Scriptures we are challenged to love one another, encourage one another, care for one another, and together be a witness to the good news of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. For this reason, Park Slope Presbyterian Church considers community groups to be vital to the health and mission of our church life.

BIBLICAL PICTURE OF COMMUNITY

Where in the Bible does it say that we have to have community groups as part of the structure of our churches? Well, nowhere. We are never *commanded* to establish community groups. And you should know that this is not the only way for Christian community to happen. There are lots of ways to cultivate relationships within a church, we just happen to think that right now, for where we are as a church and the cultural context in which we live, this is the *best* way. So the Bible does not talk specifically about community groups, but it does talk a whole lot, both in the Old and New Testament about community.

God is Community. Even before he created us, God did not exist as a solitary individual, he existed as a relationship. Mysteriously, God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Think about the implications of this: If the creator exists in relationship, and we are created in his image, then we are most fully human not as a self-fulfilled individual. Rather, we are most fully human in relationship with one another. Whether we like it or not, we are connected to one another. Created in his image, we are most able to reflect his beauty and mystery in community *together*.

God Created Community. "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God did not create humans to be alone. It was for this reason he created humans male and female: Adam needed Eve and she needed him. And so after our rebellion, when God intervened to save humanity, he created a new *community*. We tend to think sometimes that we truly are autonomous, individual units. We chose to live our lives as individuals, and believe that the consequences of our actions are also ours and don't affect anyone else. The Bible tells a different story:

- *Joshua 7.* In the book of Joshua, we see God leading his people into the promised land and giving them the city of Jericho. Yet when they move to the next city, Ai, Joshua does all that God commands him to do, and Israel is soundly defeated. As it turns out, one man, Achan, had kept some of the plunder hidden for himself. There were dire communal consequences because "sin was in the camp." Yet it was the sin of one man. *But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. (v.1)* This is not to say that if problems arise in the church it is because someone is sinning, it is simply to illustrate that we are deeply connected to one another and responsible for one another.
- *Mark 10.* Jesus has just told the rich young ruler that he must give up all his possessions, his particular idol, to follow Jesus. He is unable to do so and leaves saddened. Peter then wonders out loud to Jesus, "What about us? We have left all to follow you." Jesus says that you will get it all back and more, both in this life and the life to come. Followers of Jesus are now brothers, sisters, mothers and children. According to Jesus, our interconnectedness is not just responsibility but *gift* as well.

- *Romans 12:1* The Apostle Paul commands the Roman church to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Together, our bodies are presented to God as one sacrifice. We offer ourselves to God primarily as a community.

BIBLICAL PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY

If we had to boil down the purpose of our community groups to one phrase, it would be **to develop Christian community as Jesus Christ is experienced in his presence and power.** We believe that this reflects well the biblical purposes of Christian relationship and community:

- *To be in community with God together.* God calls us to share in what he is doing in our lives with one another, and we believe the way we experience God’s power and presence is by seeing him work in and through the lives of others.
- *To provide support and encouragement for one another.* One author has said that home groups can become just another place to focus on my individual needs. But our vision for community groups is that they will be places not only to receive encouragement but also to bring your gifts and your experiences to the group so that you can minister to others and to your neighborhood.
- *To demonstrate the love and truth of God* by the quality of our life together and in the way we serve together. Your group should be more than a place to hang out with people who are just like you. In your group you should find yourself sharing your life with people you would never imagine being with if it weren’t for the good news of Jesus Christ. The quality of our life together is measured in not necessarily in common interests or backgrounds, but in the way we care for one another and speak truth in love to one another. A community like this is formed and shaped only by the power of God, and therefore becomes a beautiful demonstration of the work God is doing in this world.

PRACTICING COMMUNITY

If community is so important in Scripture, why do we have to create structures to help us engage in it? Shouldn’t it happen naturally? Well...no. Developing vibrant, healthy relationships with others is deeply counter-cultural. We are not good at it. We naturally are self-serving and self-preserving. In a sense, our relational muscles have atrophied due to disuse or misuse. As we think about ways to engage well in healthy community life, it serves us well to remember that anything worth doing is worth doing *poorly*. It may be messy and at times painful, but it is God’s design for us and we ought to get to it. Hopefully this manual will help your group look more and more like the community God has created you to be.

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PART 2: GROUP DYNAMICS

AN AGENDA FOR A HEALTHY GROUP MEETING

While every group meeting will be unique in many respects, it is important to remember that the purpose of the group should control the agenda. **The primary purpose of the community group meeting is to develop Christian community as Jesus Christ is experienced in his presence and power.** The Biblical picture of God's Kingdom depicts men and women living and serving together for the good of others and glory of God. Though flawed, our groups should be pictures of this life together. They should be places where people are introduced to the Good News of Jesus, equipped to serve him and one another, and then released to work for the kingdom of God.

The agenda of each group should allow for this to take place on a consistent basis. Thus a healthy group, as a microcosm of the church will have the following elements in place: **Worship, Bible Study, Fellowship, Kingdom Centered Prayer and Mission.** As leader, you should be asking yourself whether these elements are in place and whether they are helping your group achieve its goals. While each element will not receive the same emphasis in any one meeting, over the life of a group they should all be present and well balanced. In addition to these key elements of a group, it is also important that the **structure** of the group be grounded in the goals of the group.

STRUCTURE

How is a group best structured to nurture and encourage Christian community? Again, this will vary from group to group depending on circumstances and the unique make-up of the group members, but research has indicated that there are some helpful guidelines to follow:

Size of the Group The size of the group has a great deal of influence on your ability to lead well and your group's ability to develop relationally. Both extremes, a group that is too large or a group that is too small, can act as hindrances to the health of the group. This then begs the question, what is the ideal group size? Most of the current research suggests that an optimal number for quality discussion and interaction is five to seven members. The upper limit ranges between 15 and 20.

According to the research, as the group size increases, participation as a whole actually *decreases*. Conversation shifts from the group at large to a select few individuals talking to one another, and the leader tends to make more "speeches" rather than facilitate discussion and interaction. Because of this dynamic, **PSPC recommends that groups multiply when they have reached a consistent attendance of twelve or more.** At the same time, leaders who feel their groups are too small ought to be encouraged. Since five is optimal, do not give up on small groups! Rather take the opportunity to develop deep and intimate fellowship.

Room Set-Up A general guideline in terms of the arrangement of space in which the group will meet is to make the space as warm, welcoming, and hospitable as possible. In New York, space is often limited, and the size of a room will dictate much of the set-up. However, there are some practical things a leader and host can do to create a welcoming environment:

- *Sit in a circle.* Ideally, every person in the group ought to see every other person. Those "left out" in terms of sight lines tend to participate less.
- *Sit at the same level.* Again, it is difficult to interact if you cannot make eye-contact with the rest of the group. If the group is so crowded that some are forced to sit on the floor, perhaps it is time to think about multiplying.

- *As leader, be accessible.* Try to sit somewhere accessible, and try not to sit where you are focused on the same people each week.
- *Refreshments?* This varies according to group taste. Some have no refreshments at all, while others serve a meal before each meeting. A good middle ground would be simple snacks or desserts and coffee, tea and water. Make sure the burden does not fall on the leader or host to provide refreshments every week. Sharing the responsibility to provide refreshments is an easy way to foster group involvement.

Fostering Group Loyalty It should go without saying that if a group is to develop community and deepen relationships with one another, members need to show up as often as possible. How do you as a leader help develop a culture of commitment within the group?

- *Sincerity.* Cultivate in your own heart a sincere concern for each person in your group. We ought to say about each person: “Christ’s care has been demonstrated by individually choosing and setting his love on this person. Therefore, they are worthy of my full attention and authentic concern when I am speaking to them.” Remember that people know when you genuinely care and when you are simply going through the motions.
- *Encouragement.* Communicate to each group member how valued and important they are to the group. Take the time to have regular conversations with everyone, and of course, be sincere about it.
- *Follow-up.* Call first-time visitors soon after they attend to tell them how glad you are they were there. Touch base with regular attendees who have missed several meetings to make sure everything is o.k. and to let them know they are missed.
- *Punctuality.* Respect people’s time. Begin and end the meeting on time. Remember that too short is better than too long.
- *Friendship and Mutual Support.* Spend the time necessary for group members to develop genuine friendships, and then encourage them to find ways to be involved in another group member’s life between meetings.
- *Lead by example.* If you do not treat the group as valuable and important in your own life, your group will be less inclined to do so themselves.
- *Evaluate importance.* Regularly ask: “Do people consider the time they put into the group a worthwhile investment? What changes if any can I make so they find it worthwhile? Attendance problems never arise when a group is worth coming to.

WORSHIP

According to Scripture, worship is integral to who we are, both as a church and as human beings. In fact, it is what we are created to do. The first question of the Westminster Catechism, used for hundreds of years to teach children and adults alike the fundamental truths from Scripture about God and human beings puts it this way:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

We were built to delight in God's beauty and glory and to celebrate his deeds, both throughout history and in our own present lives. As Pastor Tim Keller distills it: "In worship we see God for what he is worth and give to him what he is worth." As his worshipping people, we bring joy to God and are pleasures to him. Yet worship is of great benefit to us as well, bringing health to our souls and substance and weight to our lives.

The Importance of Worship In a very significant way, all that takes place in a community group meeting is worship if it is focused on and directed toward Christ. Time spent in God's Word, in prayer, in fellowship and in genuine sharing are all genuine aspects of a family worship experience, just as they are on Sunday mornings. Yet it is helpful to distinguish various aspects of worship, and in this section we will be speaking specifically of ways we *praise* God, ways we acknowledge his greatness. This worship is often neglected in our groups. Leaders argue that there is just not enough time, that it will make visitors uncomfortable or that the group will not be able to come to a consensus on how to worship. None of these are sufficient reasons to neglect God's command, and the privilege we have, to worship.

Just as with all other aspects of the life of a group meeting, be sure to plan your worship time well. If people have confidence that you know where you are leading them in worship, they will follow you with pleasure into worship. This is not to say that worship must be elaborate or "professional." You as leader merely want to assist the group by providing helpful worship formats.

How to Worship Worship can be intimidating simply because we have a limited understanding of how we can worship. Here are just a few of many ways in which we can worship together in groups:

- *Singing.* This is perhaps the most commonly understood form of worship, and it is an excellent way of doing so. Well known songs can be sung a cappella by groups. It is helpful to provide sheet music, especially for visitors who may not be familiar with any hymns or Christian songs. Instrumentation is helpful if available, but certainly not necessary. Resources are available online and in Christian bookstores, and group members can always bring their bulletins from the previous Sunday. Your pastoral staff can point you in the right direction if you are seeking music resources.
- *Psalms.* Another way to practice praise-focused worship is to read or pray through a Psalm with your group. Psalms functioned for centuries on end, among other things, as Israel's song book and it continues to be a rich resource for Christian worship today. Often we fail to worship because we do not feel we have the words; we neglect to see that the psalmists have already provided such words for us. There are many ways to pray and worship through the psalms. You and your group might read through a psalm responsively if you all have the same version of the Bible. Even more helpful would be to have copies of the Book of Common Prayer to share amongst your group, as it has all of the psalms laid out in responsive reading format. Your group can also take the time to pray through a psalm. Divide it into sections of three or four verses, read a section and then leave time for the group to offer silent or verbal praise to God based on those verses. You and your group will find this a rich and rewarding way to worship and will begin to build skills to help group members worship on their own as well.

- *Historical Prayers.* Again, remember that using another's words of praise is an authentic and pleasing way to worship God. There are many prayers by past "greats" of the Christian faith. Avail yourself of them. Read the prayers and allow the group to worship "in agreement" with the prayer, leave times of silent meditation throughout the prayer, or allow the group to add their own words in agreement. Giving ourselves a different prayer vocabulary can shake seasoned prayers out of their ruts and teach those in the group who are new to prayer.
- *Testimony.* We praise God according to who he is and what he has done. Have group members share ways in which God is working in their lives and then allow time to respond with prayers of thanks and praise.

WORD

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

--2 Timothy 3:16-17

Again, community is formed and strengthened in our groups as we experience the presence and power of Jesus Christ. In Luke's gospel, the resurrected Jesus tells two of his disciples that all of the Scriptures point to and are fulfilled in him. So we grow spiritually, as individuals and as a community, as we read, study and meditate on the Holy Scriptures.

Relative Importance of Bible Study To grasp how important Scripture is to the life of a follower of Christ, one need look no further than the first few words of 2 Timothy 3:16. *All Scripture is breathed out by God.* The Bible is the very word of God and as such is True, reliable, beautiful, powerful, and indispensable. Through God's words he reveals to us who he is and how we are to respond to him in our lives. Through God's Word and his Spirit, we experience change; we are "renewed in the image of Christ." Therefore any group that wishes to experience godly change and growth must continue to take looks into God's Word.

However, bible study is only one aspect of a healthy community group, and its importance should not be set over and against worship, fellowship, prayer, and service. Bible study should not monopolize our groups, especially in regard to time. Presbyterians have a tendency to fall into this trap. As leader, you must remember to let the goals of the group shape the structure. When Bible study dominates a group, community building is diminished. We are constantly left in a rush with too little time to pray and care for one another.

Study Format At PSPC, we provide group leaders with study guides based questions taken from the text of the upcoming sermon, and we strongly encourage our groups to avail themselves of these guides. This is based on a number of factors, some theological, some pragmatic. First, we grow spiritually as we study God's word with others. None of us are experts, and all of us have blind spots when it comes to understanding and applying the truth of Scripture to our lives. We all benefit from the insights and perspectives of others. When all of our community groups study the same passage at the same time, insight is shared across the entire church body. Second, we do not want bible studies to dominate the group time. The questions are designed to help the group get at the primary, general meaning of the passage and to help the group make relevant application. Finally, the study time is not primarily an opportunity for the leader to teach (one person talks while the rest of the group passively listens), rather it is an opportunity for the entire group to engage in active discussion. The study guides help the leader facilitate discussion using questions rather than "holding forth" for the duration of the study.

Using the Study Guides The questions and the study guide are given to assist you as leader in facilitating a group discussion through the passage so that it is understood well. The study guide also attempts to provide guidance so that you can help people apply the material to their own lives in some depth. Following are a few guidelines to help you get the most out of the material:

- *Prepare.* The study guide is given to *help* you as you prepare to lead the group. It is not meant to be read verbatim but to be adopted and adapted by you as you prepare to guide your group through the passage. Though your preparation does not need to be extensive, you must make the material your own before you attempt to lead.
- *Explore.* The guides are not exhaustive, and they do not contain every godly insight into the passage. You and your group will find other themes and threads, and you should feel free to explore them when they are biblically sound and appropriate to the context of your group

discussion. As you become more comfortable leading, you will learn to avoid the extremes of over-controlling the group with the study and chasing unhelpful rabbit-trails.

- *Customize.* These questions and guides are meant to be general guidelines, but you know the spiritual climate and needs of your group better than whomever is writing the questions. Make sure you adapt the questions to your own words in ways that best suit your group. Remember that if you don't know what the question is asking, neither will your group! You should feel free to drop questions that are confusing or unhelpful and add questions that you know will be more appropriate in your particular group. That said, we encourage new leaders to stick closely to the material until they become more comfortable leading your group.
- *Relax.* Don't be overly daunted by all these instructions, or this manual as a whole. Leading a bible study (and a group meeting) is equal parts art and science. As art, each leader will lead her group in a unique way that best suits her gifts and personality and the dynamic of her group. There is no one right way to work your way through study questions to achieve the perfect insight or application. As science, you should be encouraged that as you continue to lead, your skills will develop and you will become more adept at getting the most out of your group's discussion.

Asking Good Questions A good rule of thumb in evaluating whether a question (either from the study guide or your own) is a good one is whether or not you can come up with an answer if you ask it to yourself. If not, perhaps you should not use it. If it leads to further questions, consider asking those as well. Good questions always fit the following criteria (from *How to Lead Small Group Bible Studies*, Nav Press):

- *Is it clear?*
- *Is it relevant?*
- *Does it stimulate good discussion?*

FELLOWSHIP & GENUINE SHARING

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.”

--Hebrews 10:24,25

The fact that we gather in groups of people does not necessarily ensure that we will develop meaningful relationships. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow has found, *small groups mainly provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others*. In other words, it is entirely possible for a group to exist which never forms community but instead provides a context for individuals to have their personal needs met. To ensure this is not the case, groups must be intentional about developing true Christian fellowship.

Fellowship involves mutual, reciprocal relationship amongst those who share the same fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ through the Spirit. J. I. Packer puts it this way, *Christian fellowship is seeking to share with others what God has made known to you while letting them share with you what they know of him as a means of finding strength, refreshment and instruction for one's own soul. Gratefully one receives what others share. Equally one labors to give*. Fellowship certainly includes having one's needs met, but it equally involves a willingness to share one's life in order to meet the needs of another.

All the 'one another' passages of the Bible apply to this aspect of Christian community. We are to honor (Rom 12:10), accept (Rom 15:7), bear with (Col 3:12-13), forgive (Eph 4:2,32), pray for and confess sins to one another (James 5:16). We are to cheer and challenge (Heb.3:13), admonish and confront (Rom 15:14; Gal 6:1-6), warn (1 Thess 5:14), and instruct one another (Col. 3:16). We are to stop passing judgment on (Rom 14:13,20), stop gossiping and slandering (Gal 5:15), stop avoiding or giving the silent treatment (Rom 12:18), and stop being 'fake' (Rom 12:9) with one another. We are to bear each other's burdens (Gal 6:2), share each other's possessions (Acts 4:32ff) and submit to each other's needs (Eph 5:21).

The Shape of Fellowship What does it mean to be intentional about cultivating Christian fellowship within our groups?

- *Time*. Make sure you set aside plenty of time for members of the group to get to know one another. In the early stages of a group's existence, it is appropriate to spend 1/3 of the meeting simply socializing, both formally (think icebreakers) and informally. Also, every four to six weeks your group should meet in an exclusively social context, such as dinner, dessert, bowling, etc. Remember that people cannot share, serve, love, etc. unless they *know* one another.
- *Teach*. Remind your group often of the value and difficulty of Christian fellowship. Tell them again and again why community groups are more than mere bible studies.
- *Share*. Allow time for people to share what God is doing in their lives. This may happen in the context of the bible study as people make personal applications from the passage. It may happen during the time of prayer as people talk about both the needs and blessings in their life. Ultimately, this will happen as true community is developed and people become more involved in each others' lives outside of the actual meeting times.
- *Threat*. Be aware of how intimidating genuine sharing can be for all of us. In it we are held accountable for genuine spiritual life and experience of God. If this is lacking, we feel exposed. Superficial sharing is easy, genuine sharing must be cultivated.
- *Trust*. Honest and vulnerable sharing takes place in a climate of trust. As the group gets to know one another better, trust is built. It is natural for sharing to be more honest and in depth as the life of the group progresses. However, we must remember that all of us will at some point let another

down. Our ultimate trust can only be in God. We must also remember that the ultimate point of sharing is not to meet our own needs but to benefit others. We ought to be primarily concerned with the growth of others and the community.

PRAYER

“If we are serious at all about our Christian commitment, we will want to learn and grow in prayer. Whenever we pray, this is what we are coming to do: to pursue the mystery, to listen and respond to the voice we thought we just heard, to follow the light that beckons around the next corner, to lay hold of the love of God which has somehow laid hold of us. We all want this, not because we want, as it were, to maximize our own spiritual potential...we want it because we know, in our heart of hearts, that we want the living God. We want to know him; we want to love him. We want to be able truly to call him Father.”

--N. T. Wright

This is true as much in the life of a community group as it is in the life of an individual. If we are serious at all about our commitment to God and to one another, we will want to learn and grow in prayer. What then are the implications for our groups?

Kingdom Centered Prayer Too often we pray only for the circumstances of our lives: difficulties, health, relatives, work situations, emotional stability, and so on. This is especially tempting when a group of Christians gather to pray together. While there is nothing wrong with this in and of itself, if our prayer is only, or primarily, focused on ourself, it will fail to bring God the glory he is due and ultimately will truncate our spiritual growth. We can counter this tendency by developing kingdom-centered prayer in our groups. Kingdom-centered prayer is:

- *Focused on God’s Glory.* Take time to praise God for who he is and what he is doing in his world and in our lives. Also, have God’s glory at the center of personal requests—asking that through the answer to these requests people might see the power, love and beauty of God and so bow before him.
- *Focused on God’s Kingdom Presence.* Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” As followers of Jesus, we know that true and lasting change can only come as God’s power and love work themselves out in the world and in individual lives. Thus our prayers should be both broad and specific. Pray for:
 - the church around the world, for our unity in Christ, and our mission to proclaim Christ to the world
 - for the Park Slope Church—for our unity, ministry in the community, our worship, our pastor, staff, and lay leaders, our ministries, our mission
 - for the people of Park Slope—for justice and mercy, for our families and schools, for shop keepers and landlords, for our professions
 - for other churches and ministries in our area
 - for the nation, for the President and all in authority, for the promotion of public justice;
 - for peace, for the sick, for those who suffer or are in trouble
 - for the personal and individual needs of those in the group
- *Focused on Changes of the Heart.* When we pray for personal change and growth, we need to do so at the level where change occurs. Focus on “heart issues.” For example, when sharing about an illness, say something like this: “My current sickness is really drawing out my bitterness, my tendency toward self-pity and discouragement. I’ve also been complaining a lot lately and wounding those around me. Could you pray that God would use this experience to mold my character, to make me more like him, so that others can see what a great God we follow?”
- *Specific and Expectant.* We come to prayer as children coming to their loving and all-powerful Father. The more we pray for his glory to be revealed through his kingdom work in the world and in our lives, the more we ought to expect and anticipate it to happen. We ought not to be afraid to ask for this to happen in specific and intimate ways.

- *Modeled by Leaders.* As a leader, if you begin to pray with a kingdom-centered focus and a heart-change focus, your group will begin to change the way it prays. For new Christians, this is a great opportunity to learn a lifetime of prayer.

Methods of Group Prayer There is a wide variety of appropriate *ways* to pray in your group. Following are some suggestions:

- *Break Into Smaller Groups.* Divide your group into smaller clusters of three to five people. You may also want to divide the smaller groups by gender, depending on the level of intimacy of the shared requests. The advantage of this method is that each person can talk more, share more honestly, and pray more fully. The disadvantage is that you lose the richness of the diversity of prayer that the entire group brings, and group members will not be in touch with the needs of the entire group. Make sure to give each smaller group clear instructions and a time-frame.
- *Remain in the Large Group.* The advantages are a greater sense of connectedness and community and a richer diversity of prayer. The disadvantages are that the prayer time can become oppressively long and that people may not be as open to share in a larger group setting. If the leader is aware of these dangers and knows how to avoid them, praying as an entire group can be a rich and rewarding experience. Introduce the prayer time by saying something to this effect: *“We are going to spend some time praying for the needs of God’s church and his world, including our own personal needs. For the sake of time, please try to share as succinctly as possible. This will allow us more time as we pray. This is not to discourage anyone from sharing, it is merely a way to be considerate.”* As a general rule, once a person has shared their prayer request you should solicit the next by saying something like *“Thanks Joe. What else can we be praying for?”* This keeps the sharing time moving and lets people know what is expected of them.
- *Random Sharing and Praying.* Allow for an open time to share and also to pray. This gives everyone the opportunity to do so without feeling obligated. However, be aware that a few individuals may tend to dominate within this structure.
- *Sharing and Praying in a Circle.* Let the group know that as a request is shared, the person to the right of him or her should be prepared to pray for that request. This is probably best used after a group has met together for a while and when there are no visitors present who may feel uncomfortable and awkward.
- *Representative Prayer.* After the group has shared, one or two individuals will pray for the requests. Make sure that you ask those individuals to do so *before* the meeting rather than in the moment.
- *Using Liturgical Forms.* By using a form, someone leads and the rest join in on that topic informally. For example, using the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by your name. [Pause]
 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [Pause]
 Give us this day our daily bread. [Pause]
 And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. [Pause]
 Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. [Pause]
 For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. [Pause]
 Amen.

Additional forms can be found in *The Book of Common Prayer*.
- *Shared Prayer.* Have people share their requests as they pray. After the first person has prayed, on or two people agree with the first in prayer, and so on.

HOSPITALITY

“Practice hospitality.”

--Romans 12:13

“God’s guest list includes a disconcerting number of poor and broken people, those who appear to bring little to any gathering except their need. The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it offers a generous welcome to the “least,” without concern for advantage or benefit to the host. Such hospitality reflects God’s greater hospitality that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry.”

--Christine D. Pohl, in *Making Room*

One aspect of distinctly Christian community is the pursuit of hospitality. In fact, hospitality lies at the heart of the gospel. At one time we were outsiders, strangers to God, but by God’s grace, his lavish hospitality toward us, we have been brought into his kingdom and family. God’s hospitality is the foundation for ours, as a church, as individuals, but also as community groups.

Characteristics of Hospitality

- *Welcome.* The first mark of hospitality is generous welcome. You might think it goes without saying that a group should be characterized by a spirit of welcome, but such is not always the case. Genuine welcome is found when it is offered regardless of what the person being welcomed can offer the group. A welcoming group will ensure that everyone involved in the group, no matter how long they have been a part of the group, no matter how they found their way to the group, feels like they belong. The reason that groups often have difficulty cultivating a welcoming spirit is because hospitality is to be extended first and foremost to the stranger.
- *Strangers.* Throughout the Bible, hospitality is offered to those most in need, to the “least,” to the stranger. How does this apply to a community group? Certainly it would include welcoming people into our groups with physical or spiritual needs. There is much room for creative ideas of how a community group could extend such hospitality in the context of our neighborhood. However, offering hospitality to a stranger, in most cases, will look like welcoming those into a group who are either new to the church or to the specific group. These are strangers in the sense that they are not yet known and thus could be perceived as a threat to the intimacy and fellowship of the group. Yet to be a hospitable group means it is just this kind of person who is to be welcomed and included, regardless of the ways in which they may change the group dynamic.
- *Value and Recognition.* Genuine hospitality involves more than just including the stranger; hospitality recognizes the value and dignity of everyone in the group, regardless of who they are and how long they have participated. There will always be group members who are difficult, there will always be group members who are needy, and hopefully there will always be those who are new to the group and still unknown. To be a hospitable group is to accept them all as equally valuable as individuals and as contributors to the group.

Barriers to Hospitality

- *Risk.* Welcoming a stranger into your group can be a risk because that person is an unknown quantity. Perhaps they will contribute positively to your group dynamic, but perhaps they will prove to be detrimental. There is no guarantee that a new addition to your group will improve your group dynamic, and consequently it is easy for a group to consciously or unconsciously erect barriers to avoid the risk.
- *Intimacy and Trust.* The goodness and beauty of hospitality cannot be separated from its difficulty. Even if a group desires to be hospitable, some barriers cannot be avoided. One such barrier is the intimacy and trust already developed within a particular group. We spoke of this in the above section on *Fellowship and Sharing*. Trust is a key component in a group’s ability to

minister to and encourage one another. As new members enter the group, that trust and intimacy will inevitably need to re-develop.

Developing a Hospitable Group Ultimately, it is the leader who will set the tone for whether a group will or will not be hospitable. Model it, teach it, cast vision. Practically, the above section on *Group Structure* develops strategies that will assist your group as it strives to act as a good host to those on the outside who might wish to partake in your community.

MISSION

"How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and woman who believe it and live by it. [Our evangelistic methods -- missions, campaigns, gospel presentations, Bible distribution] have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community." --Lesslie Newbigin

Bishop Newbigin's quote is a reminder to us that the church does not exist for its own purposes. Rather, it exists to carry on God's purposes in the world, to witness both in word and in deed to his saving work both in our lives and in the world. Why is Christian community, and by extension a particular community group so important? Because it is through such groups that God will accomplish his purposes.

Mutual Ministry as Mission As we have said over and over, one of the purposes of Christian community is to provide mutual care, support and encouragement. In this sense, though mission must involve moving with God's love out beyond the parameters of our group, it begins with group members moving beyond themselves with God's love toward others within the group. Mission begins with a commitment to the value and spiritual well-being of fellow group members.

Evangelism as Mission As ambassadors of Christ, we have been given the task of making sure that others hear the live-giving message of the gospel. This is true of the church, and it is true of our groups as well. There are many ways for a group to be engaged in evangelism, but it begins with an understanding and appreciation of the Gospel of Christ within your group and your people. It is only when we come to value our place in God's family and our role in his kingdom work that we will desire to invite others to join us. This desire will lead to an openness to inviting non-believers into your group (think hospitality), and it will motivate you to be sensitive to make your meeting understandable to an outsider. It will also lead you and your group to pray regularly for friends and neighbors who have not yet committed their life to Christ and joined his body. Beyond this, there are many ways for your group to be evangelistic. Please contact your pastoral staff for guidance in this area.

Service as Mission God's salvation involves the renewal of both individual lives and *the entire cosmos*. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: *Salvation is God's determination to rescue his creation; it is his activity in recovering the world. It is personal and impersonal, it deals with souls and cities, it touches sin and sickness...God takes on the whole catastrophe.* Thus when Jesus, who was "powerful in word and deed" (Luke 24:19) calls us to follow his example and love our neighbors, such love will always involve words and action.

As a congregation, Park Slope Presbyterian Church desires to be a congregation that demonstrates the love of Christ by serving the Park Slope neighborhood. Yet we understand that we do not have the "corner on the market" in terms of service. Thus we have a community ministries team which exists to determine what ministries are currently engaging the needs of our neighborhood and to connect our congregation with those ministries. The conduit by which our church connects to those various ministries is our community group structure. Each group is responsible to choose a neighborhood ministry which is appealing to them as a way to demonstrate the love of Christ. Our community ministry team can help facilitate their decision making process. Once a group has chosen a ministry, they will begin to serve there, *as a group*, on at least a monthly basis. So at the same time, groups continue to develop community amongst themselves as they develop community with their neighborhood as they serve. As Jesus sent his disciples into the world, he promised that they would do his work, and through the power of his Spirit, "greater works than these will you do." (John 14:12) As Christ served, so do our groups.

COMMUNITY GROUP LEADER'S MANUAL

PART 3: LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS

The community group leader's primary responsibility is to facilitate and foster a Christian community within the home group. The previous section dealt with how to lead the actual time in a group. This section will focus on the characteristics and qualifications of a group leader.

LEADERSHIP QUALIFICATIONS

Membership Community group leaders, among other things, are personal representatives of the beliefs and vision of our church. The community group is one of the primary ways that people engage in the life of the church, therefore all of our home group leaders must be members or pursuing membership in the church. Please note that this does not mean a leader must personally hold to all of the doctrinal distinctions of our denomination. It does, however, mean that a leader will not teach views in the group that would conflict or undermine those of this church.

Christian Character The Spiritual qualifications of a home group leader are no different than the spiritual qualifications or expectations of any Christian. The gospel calls us to live out our lives by faith and repentance. Faith in the work of Jesus Christ knowing that he has ushered in the Kingdom of God and he is at work in the life of the church. We live by repentance because we see our sin and brokenness and our need for the Spirit of God to renew and transform us. The Christian life is moving away from self reliance and increasingly towards dependence upon the triune God in his work and his word. This means that we are not looking for a certain personality or set of gifts (those will vary greatly among the leaders) but rather someone who seeking to live out the Christian life faithfully.

Kingdom Vision The hope of the gospel is not only that Jesus Christ will change and transform you, but that the whole world and everything in it is being transformed by Christ and his kingdom. This understanding of the kingdom of Jesus Christ shapes how we think about prayer, our neighborhood, our city, and our world. One of the primary ways you can lead your group is by giving them this vision of a gospel that is bigger than ourselves. Leaders can do this by helping those in your group to think about and pray for our church, our neighborhood, and our world and also to find ways to serve our neighbors. Also the key to a healthy growing church is having many home groups, therefore we will always be looking to multiply our groups. If we have a vision for the kingdom to expand in our community than we will be willing to multiply our groups in order to create space for new people.

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through the flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from and evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

--Hebrews 10:19-25

Community group leaders play an important role in the "stirring one another up" that happens in our church. One model of leadership found in Scripture is the shepherd. In fact, Jesus referred to himself as

the Good Shepherd. As a shepherd of your group you will inevitably play a key role in the nurture and growth of the people in your group. What might this look like in the context of your group?

- Shepherding is the ability to help people in your group shepherd and care for one another.
- Shepherding is the skill of knowing where people need to grow.
- Shepherding is the work of getting people (not necessarily giving people) what they need to grow. A shepherd connects people with what they need.
- Shepherding is the gift of helping people find their gifts.
- Shepherding is visible caring through personal contact.

Here are some specific ways in which these aspects of shepherding can take place:

During Group Meetings

- *Welcoming.* This has already been covered in detail under hospitality but it is worth stating again that making someone feel welcome is the beginning of shepherding. Jesus' ministry attracted people from every aspect of life into his life especially those that were marginalized from society. Our hope is that through these groups we will be a church that reflects Jesus' ministry and his kingdom and people from all walks of life will be part of our home groups.
- *Listening.* Active listening involves asking open-ended questions that encourage people to elaborate and think through their answers. Listening as a leader means interacting with someone's thoughts or statements rather than simply waiting for someone to finish speaking so you can say something. Of course, active listening might lead you to give someone less time to speak if they are disruptive to the group or clearly leading the group in a direction that is tertiary to the issues being discussed.
- *Facilitating.* This has all the aspects of welcoming and listening in it. Facilitating within a Christian community means that we use lots of grace and patience with one another as we share our lives together. Remember that we believe Jesus is in our midst when we gather together in these groups so don't feel like you have to lead or facilitate perfectly. God is at work through you and through your group.

Outside of Group Meetings

- *Pray.* At least once a week you should set time aside to pray for the people in your group. You need to pray and they need you praying for them. This will prove invaluable to you in all aspects of leading your home group.
- *Follow up.* Depending on your availability and flexibility in your schedule this will look different for each leader. Occasionally you should try to call or meet with people in your group. This doesn't have to happen very frequently but it will connect you to the people in your group and also help in fostering community. An email or phone call follow up to a first time visitor of your group will also help them in feeling welcome.
- *Communicate with pastors.* As a home group leader you are not on your own. There will be times when either because of your time commitments or the issue you are faced with you will need pastoral oversight. Please communicate with the pastoral staff any issues that you feel go beyond the scope of a home group leader. You should have regularly scheduled meetings with the pastoral staff to discuss the general health and dynamics of your group.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As we mentioned earlier one of the hopes for our community groups is that we will be able to add more to our church in order to facilitate growth and community. The main hindrance to multiplication of home groups is the lack of leadership. Therefore, as a home group leader, one of your major responsibilities is to train, develop, and deploy leaders. Therefore we ask that every leader be committed to replacing himself/herself by recruiting one or two leaders-in-training. You are encouraged to do so even as you begin your group. And once you have begun your group you are to be constantly on the lookout for potential leaders.

The Steps towards Developing a Leader

- *Pray.* We need to ask God to raise up new leaders and he has commanded us to do so. (Matt. 9:37)
- *Identify.* Look for people who have a passion for God and compassion towards others. Again their gifts can vary greatly. You are looking for someone who doesn't have it all together, but is seeking to live by faith and repentance.
- *Mentor.* Give them small parts of the home group to lead to begin with such as taking prayer requests, leading in prayer, leading in worship, etc. At this point you just want them to get used to the idea of leading a portion of the group. You are looking for someone who is faithful to the group and committed to caring for the people within the group.
- *Intern.* At this point you can let them lead the whole group with you present. Be asking these questions: Do they have a desire to lead? Do they have a desire to facilitate good discussion?
- *Apprentice.* At some point you can tell the group that this person is an apprentice and will hopefully lead a new group in the future. By this point the apprentice should be able to clearly articulate the gospel, and have a good understanding of the vision of our church. You should also encourage them to pursue membership at PSPC.

Leadership development is not always such a straightforward process, but what is important is that you are purposeful and prayerful in developing leadership. We cannot stress enough how important it is that we always be looking for people who are willing and able to lead community groups.

COMMUNITY GROUP LEADER'S MANUAL

PART 4: TROUBLE SHOOTING

The purpose of this part of the manual is to briefly discuss some of the typical challenges that arise in the context of a community group. Remember that these groups are living organisms and gathering people together to share life and grow together in Christ is going to be both exciting and frustrating.

Silence. Don't be too scared of silence during the discussion time of the meeting, especially when your group first starts meeting. It can take a considerable amount of time before people feel free to talk. Throughout the life of the group some people won't talk because they are shy and that is fine. But oftentimes people will be silent because they are upset or don't feel the freedom to say something without being criticized. The leader should work towards creating an environment where people who might be more reserved can share their insights.

Dominating Discussion. There are the silent types and then there are people who won't stop talking. This can be incredibly disruptive and frustrating, but remember that often the people who won't stop talking during the group are just as insecure, if not more so, than those who are shy. There are various ways to handle this situation. The leader can ask questions specifically geared towards other people in the group. If an individual continues to speak, you may have to gently interrupt by thanking them for their thoughts and letting them know that the group needs to keep moving through the discussion. If the problem continues, it is best to discuss the issue with the person individually, outside of the group meeting. Remind them that community grows as the entire group becomes more involved. Ask them to help you get other people involved. No matter how you deal with them, the key is to be gentle and affirm the ways in which you see them contributing to the group, but don't be afraid to be honest.

Conflict. At times, conflict will arise between people in your group. Conflict can arise directly from what was said or done during the group or it can arise from something that happened outside of the group. Regardless, you as leader ought to help facilitate biblical conflict resolution. Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 give very practical guidelines for reconciliation. In summary, it involves dealing directly with the person (not discussing it with everyone else in the group), taking responsibility for one's own actions, repentance and forgiveness. If the situation remains unresolved and is becoming detrimental to the rest of the group, do not hesitate to approach the pastoral staff for assistance.

A Troubled Individual. In the life of a community group, inevitably someone will join whose personal troubles take a toll on the vitality of the group. How you handle the situation depends on the individual, but it is important that you address the specific issues that are creating group dysfunction with the individual privately. Such confrontation is not easy or enjoyable, but it is part of our biblical call to love one another well. Remember that the person is not a combatant to be defeated but a friend and spiritual sibling to be loved and assisted. Speak the truth in love. If possible without gossip, seek insight from other group members and from the pastoral staff.

Group Burnout. There may be times when the group seems to be losing momentum, for a number of reasons. The first step is to evaluate whether your group is functioning as a healthy Christian community. It is possible that people do not desire to invest their time and energy into the group because it is not a group worth investing in. Do not be afraid to take honest looks at the health of your group. That said, your group may just need a break. As the leader you should feel free to suggest a week off, or do something fun like an outing in lieu of the weekly group meeting. Joint potlucks with other home groups are a great way to take a break and introduce people to one another within the church. Remember the goal of the group is to build a Christian community, so be creative and know that there are lots of ways to

foster community outside of the weekly meeting. Note also that one reason we take the summer months off is to avoid group burnout.

Leader Burnout. What happens when you as leader are feeling burned out? Again, it is important to honestly evaluate the health of your group leadership. Are you relying on Christ's Spirit to help you facilitate, or are you taking on yourself the responsibility to "make" your group successful? How much of what you are feeling is a result of sins of the heart and how much is circumstantial. Remember that the Christian life is one of faith and repentance. After you evaluate, ask yourself how to address the circumstantial elements of your "burnout." This is why it is so important to create a group where you facilitate discussion rather than lead every step of the way. As leader, you should *not* shoulder all of the workload week after week. And this is also where training an apprentice can be a huge help. If you have someone leading once a month you will be less likely to burnout over the course of the year. If you are feeling overloaded, pass of responsibility to others in your group, especially those being "groomed" for leadership. But no matter what you decide to do, let the pastor staff know what you are going through so we can help.