

Small Church Community Guidebook

Background of Small Church Communities (SCCs)

Fr. Robert Beloin (1947–2018), who served as chaplain for the St. Thomas More (STM) Catholic Chapel & Center at Yale University, was a passionate advocate for Small Church Communities (SCCs) across parishes and campuses. In an introduction to an SCC Journal, which he authored in 2010 (and from which this guidebook has been adapted), Fr. Bob, as he was known, described SCCs as “a way to gather as ‘Church at the root’ or ‘Church coming from the root’ . . . It is a way to experience Church differently—besides ‘going to church,’ we learn to ‘be church’ for each other and we learn to apply the Word of God to our daily lives” (Beloin, Spring 2010)

This guidebook offers a method for forming and conducting an SCC in five sections:

1. Overview
2. Preparation
3. Individual Roles: Pastoral Liaisons, Facilitators, and Members
4. The SCC Agreement
5. The Weekly Format

1. Overview

A Small Church Community is an intentional, faith-sharing group of individuals who meet in person and/or virtually on a regular basis. The process for participating in an SCC is simple. Yet, in the midst of our busy lives, it can be elusive to live it. There are five main points of participation:

- Slow down and reflect on your life.
- Understand your faith more fully and nurture it.
- Share your faith, apply it to your life, and listen to others.
- Grow closer to others and to God.
- Record your spiritual journey, such as by writing in a journal, to appreciate the richness of it.

SCC members are committed to helping each other connect life and faith on a regular basis. They bring the growth they experience within an SCC to the larger church community, the Sunday assembly, and the celebration of the Eucharist. They participate at Mass more fully with the preparation, discussion, reflection, and application that they have experienced during the week. May God be praised in all of it!

“The basic Christian community is the first and fundamental ecclesial nucleus . . . This community . . . becomes the initial cell of the ecclesial structures.”

-Bishops of Latin America, Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America, Medellín, Colombia (as cited in Barreiro, 2011, Medellín Document on “Joint Pastoral Planning,” No. 10).

SCC gatherings involve the practice of “faith-sharing,” which is more than “intellectual discussion” or “Bible study.” Its goal is to connect the power of God’s revelation in Scripture and Catholic tradition to the *specific experience of the individual believer*, in the context of community, deepening personal commitment to a life of discipleship. Also, faith-sharing allows the People of God to articulate their perspective on the movement of the Holy Spirit. There will be differences of opinion and different points of view. All participants can expect to be listened to, respected, and accepted. Each person is invited to participate on the level at which they are comfortable. Confidentiality is always to be respected.

We are assured that Christ is in our midst and we can know that he blesses our discussion to grow in faith. With that confidence, let us begin!

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”

– Matt. 18:20

2. Preparation

SCCs generally meet once a week to discuss the readings for the following Sunday’s Mass. It is not always possible to prepare in advance for each SCC session, but when you have the opportunity, the following steps are recommended:

- Prepare for each session in a prayerful way. Pause for three minutes and offer a prayer of openness and gratitude before leaving a place and going to your SCC. Approach your SCC reverently and not just as the next activity to attend.
- Follow the instructions for each session. Stay to the time specified. Respect your fellow participants by being present to start on time. End on time so that the schedule of others can be respected.
- Make this commitment of time an important component for your own personal and spiritual growth. Be conscious that while you grow intellectually, you must also take care to grow spiritually.

3. Individual Roles: Pastoral Liaisons, Facilitators, and Members

SCCs may be “standalone” groups, meaning they meet independently, or they may be more formally connected to a parish, church, diocese, or other ecclesial community, such as a college or university chapel.

Pastoral Liaison

The pastoral liaison serves as the link connecting the SCC to the priests, chaplains, or other representatives of the larger community. Specifically, if any issue surfaces in the group, or if the group needs clarification or additional information on some point, the pastoral liaison notifies

the representative of the larger community who will respond for the next session. The pastoral liaison maintains the strict confidentiality of the SCC and does not report individual names or quotes from the discussion. What is said in the group is confidential and remains in the group.

If there are multiple SCCs affiliated with a larger community, it is recommended that the pastoral liaisons from each of the SCCs meet periodically with community representatives to discuss the status of the SCC.

Facilitator

Each SCC session has a facilitator who shapes and leads the meeting of the SCC, keeping everyone focused and monitoring the time. Preparation is necessary in order to be familiar with the flow, to be able to lead in an inviting way, and not just read directions in a monotone voice. The weekly format outlined below is a guide for the facilitator and needs to be adapted to the group and the allotted time. The facilitator is urged to be creative, encouraging, and motivating.

The facilitator should rotate every week. The facilitator for the following week can be chosen at the conclusion of each session or determined in advance. Each SCC member is invited to lead a session. The questions included in the discussion starters (listed below) are meant only to be a guide for exploring the text. The facilitator should feel free to offer other questions that may be more relevant to a particular group. Additionally, the facilitator may choose to include the second reading from Sunday's liturgy in the discussion.

Members

The members make a commitment to attend SCC meetings faithfully each week. The group changes if everyone is not present. A necessary absence should be communicated to the facilitator before the meeting.

The members will try to speak from their own experience and share their ideas and feelings. Try to make "I" statements (what "I personally" think and feel) rather than "you" or "we" statements, which tend to be impersonal and less revealing. The members agree to pray silently for each other, by name, at Sunday Mass.

4. The SCC Agreement

A good SCC experience depends on the involvement and commitment of each participant. Here are some suggestions for enriching your participation.

Communicating with One Another

Talking and listening are what we do in SCCs, but the experience is very different from casual conversation. Sharing our faith, our emotions, and our wisdom in a deep way requires a different kind of communication, a kind that often takes a little practice.

Listening

The way we listen is just as important—perhaps more important—than the way we talk, if only because we will spend much more time listening than talking. Suppose there are eight people in our SCC; this means we will likely be talking only one-eighth of the time and listening the rest.

Listening is not a passive activity, quietly waiting as others say their piece. Sometimes a group can fall into “mutual monologue,” with various members saying things that are unconnected to other members of the group. Listening must be active! As we listen, we consider each part of what we hear. Afterward, we summarize what we have heard to check that we have heard it clearly; if not, we ask a clarifying question.

There can be only one conversation going on when the group is together. We all must avoid distracting side conversations and discipline ourselves never to interrupt. When we interrupt, we have stopped listening. Sometimes we listen when nobody is speaking; periods of prayer or reflection might require silence. Together we learn to be comfortable with silence, to simply be together in the presence of the Lord.

Talking

When we do speak, we offer our perspective as a gift to the group. Our goal is not to win an argument or to impress others with our insight, but rather to seek the truth together and to help one another grow. We are not in the group as teachers or counselors, but rather to share, to listen, to help, to encourage—with attention, respect, and love.

In spiritual communities, there is sometimes too great an emphasis placed on intellectual formation. But as a *whole person*, we bring both our thoughts and our feelings to God. It is important that we develop our emotional life as a part of our total spiritual life. When we talk, we express both thoughts and feelings.

“I think that . . .” expresses thoughts; “I feel that . . .” expresses feelings. But we often misuse the latter. If we say “I feel that . . .” but can substitute “I think that . . .,” we are in our head, not our heart. “I feel that I should go to the SCC gathering” can be changed in this way: “I think that I should go to the SCC gathering. That *thought* makes me feel . . .”

When we are really talking about feelings, we use one adjective. As children, we learn two feeling words to describe our emotions: “I feel good” and “I feel bad.” One of the tasks of adult communication is to expand our feeling vocabulary: “I feel confident”; “I feel depressed”; “I feel threatened”; “I feel supported”; “I feel angry”; “I feel secure.”

Moreover, we must learn to allow our feelings to exist without judging them. Feelings are neither good nor bad—they just are. We cannot change a feeling by arguing ourselves out of them. Albert Ellis, an American psychologist who developed rational emotive behavior therapy, contends that our feelings are based in thoughts; in order to change the feeling, we need to change the thought at its root. When our feelings are negative or threatening, we can work to understand them rather than simply calling them bad.

Love One Another

One of the principal tasks of the SCC is to support one another on our faith journeys. We cannot take this for granted. We must express our support for one another. We also must be careful about negative humor or put-downs. Name-calling and labeling stifle communication, and sometimes humor, which seems innocuous to one member, can be very hurtful to another.

At times, though, our loving confrontation may be necessary and important. When we confront one another, our aim should be to help another person grow, not to belittle or demean them. When confrontation takes place in an environment of trust, we can avoid becoming defensive.

Everything that is said in the group must stay in the group. There must be absolute confidentiality concerning what we say. Though we might say, "Today in SCC we talked about the kind of justice the Gospels demand," it is never appropriate to reveal what a particular person shared. When we maintain the confidentiality of the group, we help build trust which will support our time together.

Finally, we must make attendance at each meeting a priority, and commit to starting and ending on time. We are all very busy, but we count on one another's presence for fellowship and support.

Amen!

Taken together, these preceding pages constitute a covenant, an agreement that we can make with one another. Consider it before the real work of SCC begins. What parts seem especially important? What parts seem especially challenging? What else is important for a good experience? When you have discussed the agreement, find some way for each person to express his or her commitment to live by these principles in the SCC. For example, try going around the group one at a time saying, "Amen!" (Literally, "Me too!" or "I agree!").

"Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word."

– Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018)

5. Weekly Format

Though the Scripture passages, commentary, and discussion questions change from week to week, certain features of SCC remain the same. Use these recommendations for reference, but do not feel limited by them. Each SCC group is unique. Your group should adapt this format to suit its needs.

A sample SCC meeting might include the following:

- Welcome, Opening Prayer, and Check-In
- Scripture and Commentary

- Discussion Starters
- Small-Group and Large-Group Discussion
- Closing Prayer

The time for each section is noted in parentheses. These can be adjusted for shorter or longer meetings. Breaks within the liturgical year are important so that SCC members can feel spiritually restored and renewed in their relationships. SCC gatherings can be conducted in person if possible, or virtually, or some members may meet in one location while others join via Zoom or other video conferencing software.

Welcome, Opening Prayer, and Check-In (10 minutes)

The facilitator begins by saying, “Lord Jesus, may the light of your truth shine in our minds and our hearts as we gather in your name” (or another invocation), and leads the group in an opening prayer.

Next, take a moment to “check-in.” We become community when we take time to listen to and care for one another. Go around the circle giving each member a chance to speak as others listen without interrupting. The question is not, “How are you?” but, “How are you *really*? What feelings or experiences touched you or affected your life recently?” This is also a chance to share the experience of carrying out the “Response in Action” from the previous week.

Scripture and Commentary (20 minutes)

The group turns its attention to readings for the coming Sunday: the first reading and the Gospel. Additional sections may include “Historical Perspective,” “Word of the Week” (reflecting on a Greek word, the original language of the transcribed New Testament), and “Theological Reflection,” all of which alternate each week.

The facilitator begins this section with a short prayer, for example:

*O Lord, give us a mind
that is humble, quiet, peaceable,
patient, and charitable,
and a taste of your Holy Spirit
in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.
O Lord, give us a lively faith, a firm hope,
a fervent charity, a love of you.
Take from us all lukewarmness in meditation
and all dullness in prayer.
Give us fervor and delight in thinking of you,
your grace, and your tender compassion toward us.
Give us, good Lord,
the grace to work for the things we pray for.*

– St. Thomas More, 1478–1535

Next, consider the readings for the upcoming Sunday. It is recommended that SCCs use a contemplative Bible study guide, such as the *Ponder* series (Leonard-Fleckman, 2020–2022) from Little Rock Scripture Study and Liturgical Press, that includes historical context and commentary on the Scriptures.

Go around the circle with one member reading each paragraph of the first reading. It is very important to read slowly. Read more than words; read pictures. Do not continue until you “see” the image you have just read, and give that image a chance to sink in before moving to the next one.

When one reader is finished, the next should pause briefly before beginning the next paragraph. When the first reading is finished, read the commentary in silence. Ask God what meaning this reading might have for you, and what application the Word of God might have to your life today. Were there passages that particularly struck you as moving or unexpected? Why?

After silent reflection, the group reads the Gospel one paragraph at a time, followed by a second period of silence to read the commentary and reflect on it. The facilitator may provide music during the reading of each commentary. Some groups may choose to read the Gospel twice.

Discussion Starters (10 minutes)

Continuing the silence, consider the discussion starters for a few minutes. This is not a test. There is no time limit, and you don’t need to answer every question. Rather, identify which questions lead you to deeper reflection. How do the readings confront you personally?

Spend some time writing down your thoughts. Try to write as honestly as possible: again, this is “for your eyes only.” Consider using a journal, as it provides a record that can help you appreciate the richness of your faith journey and the development of your thoughts.

Small-Group and Large-Group Discussion (40 minutes)

When everyone is ready, the facilitator may invite the large group to break up into smaller groups of three or four to share their insights from the readings and discussion starters. It is tempting to skip this step—“I want to hear what everyone is saying” is a frequent comment, but if this is done, not everyone will have a chance to speak and the conversation will not be as deep. If the SCC is meeting via teleconference, the facilitator should reassign participants into “breakout rooms.”

After about 20 minutes, the facilitator invites the group back together. Each small group may share some piece of their discussion, perhaps focusing on questions that remain unanswered. The facilitator records the discussion, paying special attention to unanswered questions and points of disagreement.

Personal Response and Response in Action (5 minutes)

In light of the large-group discussion, all members take a moment to record a particular insight or impression they have had. When all have finished writing, the group selects a “Response in Action.” The purpose of this step is to answer the question, “So what?” After all, we have heard and said, “How can we connect our faith to our daily living?”

This critical last step is an important component of SCC, and one that distinguishes SCC from Bible study. As Fr. Bob often said, “Study, Pray, Act!”

Finally, the group chooses a facilitator for the next session if they have not already done so.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

The group may express particular intentions, and the facilitator leads the group in a closing prayer. The Lord’s Prayer or other prayer may conclude the evening.

Conclusion: A Note on the Text

Note that this guide provides a basic method for the formation and practice of SCCs. SCC groups can vary their approach to reading Scripture by using such contemplative approaches as *lectio divina* (where a text is read multiple times aloud, with participants commenting on specific words or phrases that moved them) or Ignatian contemplation (where participants employ their imaginations to visualize themselves within the text). Both of these approaches are outlined in the *Ponder* study guides and may enhance the SCC group’s experience.

References

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