

**Small Group**  
**8-week “Get Started” Guide**

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**Starting in a small group is really just the beginning.**

Or, at least, a *new* beginning. Like getting into college, getting married, or becoming pregnant can sometimes seem like the end goal in and of themselves, they are really just the beginnings of new stages in our lives. Deciding to join a small group is also a new beginning of a deeper search through our faith and a new beginning of a closer relationship with God.

Over the next several weeks, you will have the opportunity to get to know one another in your group. You’ll begin to form connections with other Christians who support one another as you go deeper in your spiritual life and in pursuit of discipleship.

As followers of Christ, we believe that God is with us when we are with each other in authentic and meaningful ways—when we are in community. We need community to help us develop as human beings, into spiritual awareness and mature relationships with God. We need communities that let us be ourselves as well as challenge us to grow and learn and change. We need communities that will show us Christ and help us find Christ in ourselves.

May this small group be such a community for you.

**What you need to know about this “Get Started” Guide**

This 8-week "Guide" is meant to provide a simple and reproducible *structure and pattern* that leads one into the heart of God and back into the world. It is shaped by 3 key questions:

* What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
* What are you doing about it?
* How can we help you?

The goal for this 8-week guide is to help the group lay the foundations for *authenticity*. Eight weeks is not enough time to create a space where everyone feels safe enough to bring their real self into God's presence. But you can get started.

The key to this working is twofold. First, the Small Group Ground rules establish the boundaries. Although it might seem strange, but it is critical that this way of relating to one another gets worked into the fabric of your group. Take time each week to remind the group of the rules and challenge them to hold *each other* to them. Look for ways to positively affirm anyone who does this with love!

Second, the questions are always personal in nature. The responses challenge participants to reflect on their lives and share stories about themselves. It invites participants to open up about themselves at a level they are comfortable with. Re-direct any spontaneous informational questions to formational questions.

Be patient. It takes time and nurturing to build an authentic, safe place where trust abounds. But it is well worth it. This is where God does His best work! Once you have this format in your group’s rhythm, it can be applied to any other material your group wishes to explore.

**Small Group Ground Rules**

This is the “operating system” of a small group. This is the most important piece to building an authentic community. These rules provide the boundaries of a space that is safe to be real, authentic and vulnerable so that Holy Spirit can do its work. We live, act, and talk differently in a small group! Developing this kind of environment takes time, team-work, and a lot of trust.

At the first gathering, it is well worth taking the time to go over these rules *in detail* and why they are important. Have a different person read each one aloud and share what it means in their own words. Make sure everyone understands and agrees to them. It is helpful to remind them *each week* of the rules and how to maintain them. Finally, it is *critical* that you ensure the group follows these rules. Interrupt any conversation in order to remind them to adjust their talk.

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| *1.* ***Safe Environment*** *– This is a judgment free zone! Feel safe to be your authentic self.* | *6.* ***Pause****—Allow a pause after someone finishes to provide room to consider what was said before responding.* |
|  |  |
| *2.* ***Accountability****—Everyone’s help is expected to make this safe.* | *7.* ***Silence****—Expect and welcome silence. Consider it sacred space for God to speak.* |
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| *3.* ***Confidentiality****—What is said in the group stays in the group, unless permission is given.* | *8.* ***Respect****—Don’t try to solve or fix each other. Just receive what they share (even if you disagree) as a gift. Offer encouragement, speak truth, point to Jesus.* |
|  |  |
| *4.* ***“I” statements****—Speak for yourself-your beliefs, feelings, responses. It’s easy to talk about the issues of others, but we want you to put* ***yourself*** *on the table.  Use “I” statements rather than “them,” “the church,” “us,” “we,” “you.”* | *9.* ***Honor****-- Honor the different ways God works in individuals. Resist the temptation to console or offer condolences, as it may lead some to stop sharing, or try to fix.* |
|  |  |
| *5.* ***Listen****—Try to avoid thinking about what you are going to say next. Avoid “cross-talk” and interrupting.* | *10.* ***Sharing****—Be sensitive to the amount of time you share. Recognize that all group members are invited to share aloud only what and when they are ready to share.* |

**SESSION 1: Get Started!**

Where Two or Three are Gathered (Matthew 18:20)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Light a candle, ring a bell, sing/play a song, recite a litany together, be silent.
* Matthew 18:20 “Where two or three are gathered, there I am among them.”
* Offer a prayer. Pray for “spiritual authenticity.”
* Create a Sacred Space: Pass out copies of the ground rules. Take turns reading each one, and have that person try to restate it in their own words…and why it is important. At the conclusion, ask if everyone understands them, and is willing to agree to them. Get a verbal commitment from each person. Finally, to help each other follow these rules, give everyone ‘permission’ to loving interrupt and point it out when they are being forgotten.

**EXPLORE:**

* OPENER: Introduce Yourself:
  + Who are you and what would you like the group to know about you?
* Handout “Spiritual Loneliness.”
  + Take turns reading portions and ask the group to underline/highlight words or phrases that standout to them.
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + What really stood out to you in the reading?
  + Do you agree with the statement that many people are “spiritually lonely?” What does it look like? Have you ever felt this way?
  + What fears do you have about being in a Small Group?
  + Have you ever experienced a spiritually authentic community?
  + How do you think a spiritually authentic community can help you live more like Jesus?
  + What will you have to do in order to help this group become a spiritually authentic community?
  + What in your personality or behaviors might hinder this kind of community?

**REFLECT:**

Re-read Matthew 18:20. Reflect in silence for a few minutes on all that we talked about: consider...what is God trying to say to me?

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Explain how the expectations of this prayer time are different than other groups.
  + Praying for one another is a critical component of being on this journey to be authentic together. So, this is different than other prayer times you may have experienced.
  + This is not a time to share prayer concerns. There are other places to pray for the wider concerns of the world and in our lives. Rather, this is a time when we really *pray* for what God is *doing* in each other's lives: what we are dealing with in our Spirit, opportunities for growth, gratitude for what God has done, guidance for new challenges we are taking on, etc.
  + The key is to be specific and brief so all have a chance. We may do this differently each week, we may pray for one person, or one situation, or for ourselves, or in partners, or in silence.
* Pass the candle to each person. Invite the person to either pass it, or offer/share a prayer about something they discovered today.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session, or use the following:
  + Note the opportunities where you experience 'authenticity' this week.
  + Read and reflect on the scripture for next week. Maybe even try to memorize it.
* Extinguish the Candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to others.
  + Go in Peace.

**Spiritual Loneliness**

**We are Christians.** We go to church, attend Sunday school, sing songs, pray, and we may even read the Bible on a regular basis. We try to forgive others, to let people go ahead of us at stop signs, to teach our children to share and not to hit. We often give generously, will donate canned goods and coats to those who need them, and will even send our youth on a mission trip. We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins. We are Christians.

But some of us feel like something is missing.

We pray, but are not sure if we’re doing it correctly, or if God is really listening. We read scripture, but it seems ancient and doesn’t speak into our lives. We want to know God’s plan for our lives but don’t know how to find it. We worship but walk out of the sanctuary and by Monday morning the hymns are no longer in our heads and we’ve forgotten the point of the sermon. It’s not just a feeling, but it’s our spirit, our soul, that tells us there is something more, if only we could figure out what it is.

For many, the Christian life is very busy with activity and commitments. But our lives are not transformed, our souls are not inspired, and we can’t seem to find peace. Dallas Willard points out the disparity between “hoping for life expressed in Jesus” and the “actual day-to-day behavior, inner life, and social presence of most of those who now profess adherence to him.” Think of Christmas carols. “Joy to the World! The Lord is come!” They convey so much excitement, anticipation, and hope for a new life, a transformed world in Christ. But how long does that hope last us throughout the year? Where is the promised new life?

In fact, many of us are what could be described as *spiritually lonely*. We go to church with our friends or family, we sit in a room full of hundreds of people singing and praying together. Though we may connect with others on a social or familial level and though we may worship right next to someone, we rarely connect to them on an authentic level.

**The thing that is missing in so many of our faith lives is spiritually authentic community.** Real community, beyond our immediate family, where we know someone and they know us. A place where we can drop our masks and finally be real—not be judged or fixed. A place where our faith is what unites and not the fact that we work at the same place or that our kids go to the same school. Too many of us don’t have people who will walk with us in our pursuit to follow Jesus. We are rarely in groups of people we trust in which we can discuss questions of faith and God, where we can listen and be listened to, where we can pray for and be prayed for. We are rarely with people who will remind us of where we want to go spiritually and who can also help us get there. We are rarely with people in whom we can see Christ and who can help us encounter Christ in ourselves.

Jesus said, “When two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” And that’s when being Christian begins to be more than just another thing to do. When Jesus Christ—God incarnate who was killed and then defeated death, who rose above hate and fear and doubt—stops being an abstract notion and is among us, that is when our lives begin to change. Our lives begin to transform to look like Christ, and we become true disciples.

*Adapted from “Small Groups” by Highland Park United Methodist Church, Dallas, Texas*

**SESSION 2: The Importance of Environment**

Four Soils (Mark 4:1-20)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Consider lighting a candle buried in rich soil; or use the same ritual you used the previous week.
* Consider reciting the Prayer of St. Francis together, or play a recording of the song that put the prayer to music.
* Centering: “Transformation and growth occurs when we are in the right kind of environment in which we can feel safe to be our true, authentic selves.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS.
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER
  + Over the course of your life, who or what had the most impact on your spiritual growth?
* SCRIPTURE: Invite someone to read Mark 4:1-9
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + Emphasize verse 9. Seriously, what did you hear?
  + Why do you think Jesus told this story? What is the purpose of good soil?
  + Noted pastor, Mark Ingram once said of this parable: “The greatest seed in the greatest soil cannot grow in the wrong in the environment.” What do you think he meant?
  + Describe the environment you need in order to become your authentic self.
* SCRIPTURE: Invite someone to read Mark 4:14-20
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + How would you describe the type of “soil” you are in your life right now? (Are you hardened to the truth of God; or, are you experiencing trouble that is pulling you away from God’s truth; or, are distractions in your life choking out the truth of God; or, are you open to receiving the truth of God’s Word, even if it’s not what you want to hear?
  + What nurturing do you need to become rich, fertile soil for the Word of God?
  + What stands in your way of becoming “fertile soil”?
  + Do you really want to become rich, fertile soil? How can this group help you?

**REFLECT:**

Lead them in a breath prayer: As you breathe in, think of breathing in the Spirit into all corners of your body, soul, and life. As you breathe out, breathe out any anxiety, pain, suffering, distractions, concerns, sins, etc. Do this slowly on your own for a few minutes, letting God fill you, and noting any thoughts that God gives you.

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Remind the group of the expectations of our prayer time. Be creative and do something different this week:
  + Try: sharing their prayers in partners, and then pray for each other. Challenge them to check in on their partners during the week to update the prayer.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session. Possible additional suggestions:
  + Consider getting a new plant, and nurturing it from a seedling. Let it grow as a metaphor for your faith.
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God;
  + Be a blessing to Others;
  + Go in Peace.

**Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi**

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,   
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;   
to be understood as to understand;   
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;   
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;   
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

St. Francis was born at Assisi in 1182. After a care free youth, he turned his back on inherited wealth and committed himself to God. Like many early saints, he lived a very simple life of poverty, and in so doing, gained a reputation of being the friend of animals.  He established the rule of St Francis, which exists today as the Order of St. Francis, or the Franciscans. He died in 1226, aged 44.

The prayer has many of the biblical truths of what it means to be a Christian - to seek to give, and in so doing, receive blessings; that the [Lord's Prayer](http://www.prayerguide.org.uk/lordsprayer.htm) asks God to forgive us as we forgive, and that the goal of eternal life can only result from us putting to death our old sinful lives.

**SESSION 3: A Little Help from my Friends**

The Paralytic and Four Friends (Mark 2:1-12)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Consider lighting a candle wrapped thickly in gauze.
* Centering: Consider reciting the Prayer of St. Francis together from last week, or a few moments of silence. “In our quest to become authentic and real before Jesus, we need a little help from our friends.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS.
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER:
  + In your opinion why are so many Christians “stuck” and not growing spiritually?
* SCRIPTURE: Mark 2:1-12 (using Lectio Divina).
  + Identify three persons willing to read aloud. Instruct them to read it deliberately, and pausing for about a minute between readings. Tell the group to close their eyes, and to simply let the words wash over them, noting any words, images, memories, or feelings that emerge. After the final reading, give 2-3 minutes of quiet reflection time.
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + What emerged from this exercise for you?
  + Is it easier for you to receive help from others or give help to others?
  + Who have been stretcher-bearers for you (who helped you overcome obstacles in your life to bring you into the presence of Jesus)?
  + What is paralyzing you now (preventing you, holding you back) from fully surrendering to God’s healing grace?
  + How comfortable are you with asking this group to help you?

**REFLECT:**

Ask the group to close their eyes for a few silent minutes and imagine themselves in this story. Which character are you? Why? What help do you need from others that you just can’t (or won’t) do on your own, to help you get close to Jesus?

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Remind the group of the expectations of our prayer time. Be creative.
  + Try: Consider choosing one person to pray for and gather everyone around to lay hands on him/her. Designate a person to start and close.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session. Possible suggestions:
  + Consider this week having a spiritual conversation with someone. Ask the group for pointers on how to strike up a conversation like that. Tell us next week how it went.
  + Hand out/Email them the scripture and/or article for next week to read and reflect.
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**SESSION 4: The Person Behind the Mask**

Legion (Mark 5:1-20)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Consider lighting a candle next to a mask, and incorporate any other rituals.
* Centering: Offer a few moments of silence. “Becoming truly authentic with one another challenges us to identify and remove the masks in our lives.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS.
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER:
  + Share a time when you did not or could not be yourself. (Halloween; “work” self vs “home” self; theater role; etc.) How did you feel?
* SCRIPTURE: Mark 5:1-20. Being a long passage, take turns.
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + Answer Jesus’ question to Legion, “Who are you?”
  + Consider reading the article, “Sir, do you know who I am?” Now re-ask the above question.
  + What has this scripture revealed to you about the ‘masks’ you wear? What ‘masks’ do you wear?
  + Why is it so hard to be ‘real’?
  + How do you know when you are being your “authentic” self?
  + What helps you be “real” with others?
  + What would you like Jesus to transform in your life?

**REFLECT:**

Ask the group to close their eyes for a few silent minutes and reflect on all that we talked about: What would your life look like if God began to transform you? Or What is one mask that you LONG to take off?

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

Try: Explain that during the prayer time today we will slowly go around the circle. If you are comfortable, pray either silently or aloud for the person on your right. When you are done, then pass the candle or gently touch the next person.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session. Possible additional suggestions:
  + Because next session’s scripture (John 4:1-42), the story of the Woman at the Well) is a bit longer, encourage them to read ahead. Email them a reminder.
  + Faith Words: Over the next week, think of one word (or short phrase) that describes your faith now. Be prepared to share why you chose that word in 60 seconds or less! (Seriously, 60 seconds!)
  + Others?
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**Sir, Do you Know who I am?**

There was a story floating around about President Bush a few years ago. He was supposedly visiting a nursing home, where he took the hand of an elderly man walking the halls and asked kindly, “Sir, do you know who I am?” The man replied, “No, but if you ask the nurses they can tell you.”

Who are you? A person’s *identity*, or who one truly is (really is), is often one of the hardest things to grasp, or even really to accurately explain. At the beginning of each year, many people make resolutions to improve themselves, by losing weight, getting rid of a bad habit, saving money, spending more time with family, and even working harder to grow spiritually. While all these endeavors are worthwhile, we all recognize that most New Year’s resolutions are forgotten by the end of January. What is clear is that we have an innate sense that something is not right about ourselves. We sense we are not happy; we feel as if we are lost. When we look in the mirror, we don’t always like what we see. We are embarrassed by the way we treat ourselves, and have forgotten how to treat others. Our solution to improving ourselves is to change who we are on the outside, so that we can feel better about who we are on the inside.

The truth is, we don’t really know what is on the inside. We don’t really know who we are, but it’s not for a lack of trying. We take the Myers Briggs inventory to tell us what our personality is; we gauge success at work by the amount of money we make; we decide if our bodies are acceptable by some pictures in magazines; we even think that if we attend church more often will somehow define who we are. Maybe this New Year’s we can get beyond selfish resolutions that offer only temporary and fleeting fixes; and instead, grasp the truth about ourselves and our identity that ultimately gives us real hope, powerful purpose, and a zest for life.

Identity is difficult to determine because we always tend to define it by a relationship to something else. American culture teaches us that our identity is shaped in relationship to our jobs: we are doctors, lawyers, preachers, stay-at-home moms. Our family culture teaches us that our identity is formed around our relationships with others…we are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, etc. Events often define one’s identity, where just the name conjures an identity: Bill Buckner, Neil Armstrong, or Osama Bin Laden. Or one’s identity is often determined by one’s beliefs like Rush Limbaugh, Evangelicals, or atheists. But isn’t our identity determined by more than just what we do, where we live, our heritage and even what we decide to believe?

So, exactly, who are you? Who ARE you, *really*?

Written by Rev. Brandon Dirks

**SESSION 5: How Could He Know *That?***

Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Consider lighting a candle floating in water. Remind them that “God is here.”
* Centering: Offer several moments of silence. “Becoming authentic with others challenges us to be real with ourselves.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER
  + Faith Words. Did you think of a word/phrase that describes your faith? Give everyone an opportunity to share and hold them to the 60 seconds (use a stopwatch).
  + (Option if you did not do “faith words” this week: What is the one thing people often misunderstand about you?)
* SCRIPTURE: 1John 4:1-42
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + Did everyone have a chance to read John 4:1-42 over the week? (Instead of taking the time to read it together as a group, use the following questions to allow the group’s collective memory to unveil the story. Point out selected passages as participants note them.)
  + What really jumped out to you about this passage as meaningful to you? Explain.
  + Did anything confuse you about this story?
  + What do you think is the woman’s *deepest* need? Can you identify with her?
  + How do you suppose the woman’s *feelings* changed throughout this story? How have you experienced the same sort of feelings *in your faith*?
  + What impact does the “truth” of the woman’s life have once it was in Jesus’ hands? How does that help *you*?
  + What does God/Jesus just “know” about you that would surprise you if he told you “everything you ever did?” In other words, have you ever felt “embarrassed” because of something in your life...that you are afraid of what people would think; or what Jesus might think? (remind them of confidentiality; and it is okay if participants don’t answer—they are answering in their own mind!)

**REFLECT:**

* Ask the group to close their eyes and reflect, “What is your deepest need?” or “How is Jesus changing your life?”

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Popcorn. Ask everyone to consider what God is doing in them, and invite them to pray *honestly* for *themselves out of their deep need for God in their life*. You will start the prayer, then pause. They can either pray silently or aloud. After a few minutes, tell them you will close the prayer.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session.
  + Add Confession to your daily prayer life. Confession is a powerful way to become real and authentic before God and one another. In fact, the scriptures (James 5:16) teaches that confessing to one another is what leads to true transformation. This may be a great place to teach them the A.C.T.S. format of daily prayer. Or, if they are not ready for that, you can point to the Lord’s prayer as a great format for daily prayer (note the confessional language in it).
  + Encourage everyone to read next week’s passage 1 Samuel 17. Consider handing out or emailing the article “Five Smooth Stones” to reflect on.
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.” Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**SESSION 6: Facing Giants**

David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Gather 5 Smooth Stones around a candle to identify your sacred space. Remind them that “God is here.”
* Centering: Offer several moments of silence. “Fear is the only enemy of authenticity.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS.
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER:
  + When you were little, what were some of your greatest fears?
* SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 17
  + Since everyone read the scripture during the week, you may decide NOT to take time to read it during the session.
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + Most all of us have heard or read the story of David and Goliath before. As you read it this week, did anything new strike you?
  + Has your faith ever been tested by fear? What happened? What did you do or not do? Where did you see God, if at all?
  + Read verse 11: “On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.” Why were they afraid?
  + In this story, do you believe David was ever afraid? Why or why not?
  + How do you tend to react when your abilities are questioned?
  + Read verses 45-47. Why does David face the Giant?
  + Take turns reading the attached article “Five Smooth Stones.” After reading, are you more like David or Goliath? Explain

**REFLECT:**

Ask the group to close their eyes and reflect, “What is the ‘name’ of the Giant or fear you are facing in your life right now?”

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Pass the stones around the group one by one. As they hold a stone, invite persons to pray for the power to FACE their fear, and OVERCOME it. Encourage them to pray over each other.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session.
  + Is there anything that came up today that has urged someone to do something about the Giants in their lives? How can we hold you to account for it?
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**FIVE SMOOTH STONES**

Almost all of us know this story of David and Goliath, because it’s in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures, all three. And it’s made its way to the heart of our contemporary cultural imagination. Goliath the Philistine is big, beefy and belligerent. David the shepherd boy from Bethlehem steps out of obscurity, waves aside the clumsy armor offered him by Saul, the king of Israel, and, taking five smooth stones and a slingshot, leaves Goliath biting the dust. You can bet that 99 percent of people who read this story identify with David. We all think we’re the little guy. And in movies, athletics, business and politics, we all feel the pull of that righteous cultural conviction: Stand up for the little guy.

So why do we still say we like the little guy? We want our movies to be about David, but we spend our lives trying desperately hard to be Goliath. We think it’s quaint and clever that David got by with five smooth stones and a sling, but we spend our own energies stockpiling swords and spears and javelins. We admire the fact that David forswore Saul’s armor and gadgetry, but just look at our car, just look at our house, just look at our country: we’ve beefed them up to look like Goliath, with so many safety and security features we can hardly move around in them.

Here’s David, full of confidence, full of faith, full of hope, telling Saul he doesn’t need the heavy armor and telling Goliath he doesn’t need the mighty power. David defeated Goliath. And what happened next? The people swung behind David. David became king. But it didn’t stop there. Gradually a terrible irony began to take shape. David became Goliath. David became a bully. David became a merciless military powerbroker. David became a ruthless acquisitor of pleasure and advantage. David became the overblown beached whale he’d begun his career by destroying.

How are you going to avoid losing your soul? That’s what we’re talking about. When everyone in the world seems to admire and fear Goliath, with all that muscle and armor and big talk, and all your advisers are like Saul, saying, “Here’s all this armor; you’d better put it on; you’re going to need this round here,” how are you going to remain true to yourself and what you believe in?

*Excerpt from a sermon by Samuel Wells (Vicar, St. Martin in the Fields, London) preached on* May 14, 2010, at Duke University Chapel at Duke’s baccalaureate. *For entire transcript, see: https://www.faithandleadership.com/five-smooth-stones*

**SESSION 7: Can you hear me, now?**

Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-11)

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Light a candle in complete silence...Say, “God is here. Can you hear Him?”
* Centering: Be silent for several moments….listening. “Being authentic before God.”
* Small Group Ground Rules: Quickly go over the ground rules. Pick one out that the group can focus on this week.

**EXPLORE:**

* LEFTOVERS
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER:
  + How would you describe the road to spiritual maturity to a brand new Christian?
* SCRIPTURE: 1 Samuel 3:1-11
* Suggested Questions for Exploration:
  + What is important to you in this story?
  + What do you *feel* when you hear the words, “Here I am?”
  + Re-read verse 11. Why is this significant to you?
  + Have you ever heard God call you? What did God say to you?
  + Why is it hard for you to hear/understand the voice of the Lord?
  + What do you do to ‘listen’ for the voice of the Lord?
  + Who is your “Eli?” Who helps you discern the calling of God?

**REFLECT:**

Invite everyone to pray Samuel’s prayer “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening” with a few minutes of silence.

**SHARE:**

* Quietly invite everyone to focus back on the group, and invite them to share anything that is stirring in their soul. Be patient; be comfortable with silence. If no one shares, this is okay! If you want to use follow up questions, consider these.
  + What is the Holy Spirit telling you?
  + What are you doing about it?
  + How can we help you?

**PRAYER:**

* Consider closing in Silent prayer at the very end. After you do the Blessing portion, explain fully what is about to happen. Explain that we are going to try something new, and to simply give it a try. Invite everyone to a time of silent prayer. When they feel they are done, they are encouraged to go ahead and leave silently. It can be just a few seconds, or several minutes. It’s up to them. Have them say their goodbyes, and grab their belongings, etc. before you begin.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Note any challenges or commitments that came up during the session.
  + Try a “listening Prayer” technique during your daily prayers this week. Go about your daily prayers as you normally do, presenting your requests, worries, praises, concerns, etc. Then, pause and listen for a few moments, asking God, “Is there anything you would like to say to me? Give God a chance to speak to you. Develop this habit as you begin to hear the voice of God. “My sheep hear my voice…” John 10:27
  + Next week is our last week together. Be in prayer this week about the impact this group has had in just 8 weeks. Think: Is this something you would be willing AND able to continue?
* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**SESSION 8: What are you looking for?**

Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)

This session is designed to invite them to continue on as a group. You initially promised them 8-weeks, and it is okay if there are those in the group who wish to explore other groups or other directions. Although 8 weeks may not have been enough time to create a spiritually authentic community, our prayer is that the foundations have been set. For those who would like to continue on as a group, this session will help identify some of the needed directions this particular group might consider going.

Your goals:

* Celebrate what God has done in our short time together.
* Brainstorm a list of topics that the group feels they need to address in their knowledge, character, behavior, or skills as a follower of Jesus.
* Identify the next “season” (start and end dates).

**ENTER Sacred Space:**

* Use a cross, a Bible, or light just a lone candle.
* Centering: After a moment of silence, read John 1:38 “When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?”
* Small Group Ground Rules: In our closing week, look at the rule on “Safe Environment” together. Ask the group how “safe” they felt over the last two months. What could we do to help us feel safer?

**EXPLORE:**

* Leftovers
  + Anything from the previous week that you would like to talk a little more about?
* OPENER:
  + On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your spiritual health? What is one thing you think would help you?
* SCRIPTURE: Read John 3:1-21
  + Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin who secretly sought out Jesus at night. Nicodemus was curious to find out more about Jesus. The conversation they have leads to the heart of John’s gospel. He eventually became a follower of Jesus, and helped to take Jesus down off the cross.
  + What is new birth to you?
  + In what ways do you still long for new birth?

**REFLECT:**

Over the next few minutes of silence, imagine that you are Nicodemus coming to Jesus and have the opportunity to have an intimate, honest conversation. What are the question(s) you would like to ask?

**SHARE:**

Handout “The Vision of Small Groups”

* Invitation to continue. Talk with the group that they are invited to continue together as a group. Some may choose to try to a different group, or need to find a different day or time. Some may be interested in leading a group themselves. There may be many reasons why someone can’t continue and that should be honored.
* Brainstorm. For those who choose to continue, invite them to talk about some areas the group would like to explore next. Over our eight weeks together, what areas have you heard *the group* bring up that you think we should explore? Make a list together. After you have created a list, ask the group to rank the top 3-5.
* Take a break? It may be appropriate to take a break as a group before resuming. If you do, consider assigning prayer partners with the assignment to touch base with each other at least once a week until you resume. Or, have a meal together. Or schedule a service project together. Maybe the group has other ideas. Make sure you let them know the start AND end dates of the next session.
* Invite new participants. Invite the group to think of people in their circles that would love a group like this. If your group is already full (6-8), don’t be afraid to have the hard conversation of how do we help others have the opportunity we’ve had of a spiritually authentic community? Maybe there is a new leader among your group that just needs a little encouragement. A key goal of a group’s growth is evidenced in multiplication (replicating itself). Starting a new group, a new study, or a new emphasis is the perfect time to invite new people.

**PRAYER:**

Allow the group to pray for each other. Consider telling them that this is an open prayer time…that you will open the prayer with a few words, and then stop. During that time they can pray aloud or silently. After a few minutes, you will close the prayer time.

**EXITING Sacred Space:** Blessing

* Extinguish the candle with a blessing: “You are blessed by God. Be a blessing to others. Go in peace.”
* Turn to a partner and repeat after me:
  + You are blessed by God.
  + Be a blessing to Others
  + Go in Peace.

**The Vision of Small Groups**

We’ve come to the end of our agreed upon time of 8 weeks, but hopefully something has stirred in you to see that this is just the beginning—or at least a continuation of your spiritual journey. At times, we may lose track of the primary purpose of our Small Group. That’s normal. Occasionally, we confuse these weekly sessions for social gatherings, therapy sessions, or gripe fests. It’s vital in creating and maintaining a healthy group that we remind ourselves of the vision. **The intent of the Small Group is to provide a safe place to be spiritually authentic so that we can help each other live more like Jesus.** In a healthy group, friends are made and support is given, but the primary purpose is to work on our personal relationships with Jesus, so that we can live like Jesus in the world.

Eight weeks is usually not long enough to build the kind of environment that helps people feel fully free and 100% safe to be vulnerable, real, and allow God to really work on us. But hopefully, you received a foretaste of what is possible in a spiritually authentic community. You are invited to continue your journey with each other.

It is completely acceptable if you decide you need to go in another direction. You may decide to devote a season of your life to a Bible study so you can learn more scripture. Or connect to a service ministry because the Lord has nudged you to serve others. Or, you may know of a few others who need a small group, and you would like to help them experience authentic community. Whatever your reasons, feel free to share with the group that for now, you need to go in a different direction. The group will respond with love and encouragement.