

# STAY Connected

Journals for Catholic Women

## lelel Small Group Facilitator's Guide ojo



### The Gift of Invitation

In February 2006, the first time I walked into a room full of women gathered to study the faith and the Scriptures together, I was scared to death. I had never shared my faith with others outside of religious education classes. Would these women be frustrated by my lack of knowledge of the Bible? They seemed so comfortable, able to find Bible verses in a single bound, and even able to spontaneously pray from their hearts. It was all I could do to not bolt for the door; what was I thinking in saying yes to this invitation?

Three years later, I was still attending those weekly meetings. I had become able to quickly find Scripture verses in my Bible (thanks to my “handy dandy” Bible tabs) and even pray from my heart. Jesus had grown from a two-dimensional figure on the cross to a true friend and Savior. This group had taught me how to grow in my faith by staying connected with Jesus and with others. The real gift of saying yes to the invitation to join a faith sharing group was a true relationship with Jesus and the opportunity for amazing friendships with sisters in Christ.

#### **My Turn to Lead the Group**

When circumstances lead to my leaving the group, I felt lost and sad. My spiritual life started to suffer, as I had not realized the significance of the accountability of meeting weekly with the women in my faith sharing group. What to do next?

To be honest, I was more than a little overwhelmed by the idea of hosting or even leading a faith group of my own. Yet, the blessing it had been in my life was far too great to let the fear keep me from providing this opportunity to others. The first real issue was that I lack the feminine

hospitality gene. I had to make peace with my spiritual sisters, accepting that most weeks when they came for study they would be met with a “family clean” home versus a “company clean” one. Much to my delight, no one complained because they were just happy to have a place to come together each week.

Over the last seven years, I have held small group book club/Bible study at my home—with occasional moves to the parish center or other people’s homes. I learned to ask for help with hospitality, realized it was not my job to know all the answers, and saw my spiritual life flourish within this special sisterhood. I can safely say all my fears had been completely unfounded!

## Choose a Location

- In a Church — options include: hall, basement, or classroom
- In a Home — the same home each week
- A rotation of participants homes (per week or per book)

### **Finding Just the Right Place**

Location can be either in your home, in a rotation of homes, or at your parish. My advice: weigh the pros and cons to decide which is best for you and your group; then trust your instincts! Some of the cons for a home meeting include having to limit attendees due to space, having to clean for company (my primary obstacle), or having limited parking.

Small group size is typically 8 to 10, although 12 to 15 is doable, especially for a short period of time like the six weeks of Lent. If you are blessed with a high response rate, consider creating more than one small group either at the same or various locations.

Pros for meeting in a home include that it’s often cozier and may be less intimidating for some who do not typically attend church-related events. A home environment also makes it easier to extend invitations beyond your own parish. The most important part is remembering that the goal of the group is to grow closer to Christ. After ten years of leading Bible study, I now host one at the parish (yearly and usually co-ed) and one in my home (seasonal and for women only), and I find that both can be advantageous. Like me, you may find that there is a place for both in your plans. Hosting at the parish has given me some freedom in the commitment, I can miss a week if necessary without disrupting the rest of the group; and my home group has provided the opportunity to expand my outreach.

Be flexible and open to try different locations until you find what works best for your group. For instance, snow can make parking difficult at some homes, so for the winter your group may wish

(with your pastor's permission) to meet at the church. The key is finding a place you can meet regularly. I recommend weekly.

## **Finding the Right Day and Time**

Now which day of the week? I have found that typically Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday are best. A good rule of thumb is to check with your church bulletin to make sure you're not competing with another event like Women's Guild or adult religious education classes.

And, what time? 7:00 pm seems to fit most schedules, giving enough time for participants to care for family and food. I block two hours for the group, but some prefer an hour and a half. Whichever you choose, BE VERY PUNCTUAL with both your start and end times. Trust me on this one: women are much more likely to come back if they know that their time will not be wasted and that they will be able to leave when they are expecting to.

Additionally, I also offer an optional Rosary before the group which, I begin half an hour before our start time.

## **Recommended to Meet Weekly**

Regardless of when you choose to meet, be consistent. It is highly recommended for groups to meet every week. In fact, the *Stay Connected* series was developed to make it easy for women to complete a meeting in two hours if necessary. This way your group can continue to meet when schedules are busy (such as at the beginning or end of the school year, at Christmas, or over the summer) or as an inspirational place-keeper to encourage your group to remain together between books or studies that require more extensive reading and responses.

Flexibility is once again important; it may take a few book cycles to determine which day and time works the best for your group.

## **Getting the Word Out**

Now that you have a plan, it is time to let women in your parish and beyond know about your small group Bible study, book club, or faith sharing (whatever you choose to name it).

Some Ideas for Getting the Word Out:

- ⇒ A sign-up at the back of the church following Mass. Be sure to get permission first.
- ⇒ A registration table during religious education hours. Remember: personal invitation is your best marketing tool.
- ⇒ Of course, do not forget the good old-fashioned bulletin notice.

- ⇒ Social media speeds the dissemination of information with Facebook posts, private messages, or email invites. Even Twitter and Instagram can be utilized to reach your potential participants.

However, the truly best way to spread the news is by word of mouth. A personal invitation either by speaking to someone after Mass or during your children's basketball games, or even a personalized email or instant message, is usually the most effective way to build your small group. Afraid you will market too well and your small group will become too large? That is a tremendous problem to have! Consider either breaking the group into small groups once everyone arrives at the church or encouraging a friend or fellow parishioner to host a sister group" at her home.

## Choose a Book

The *Stay Connected Journals for Catholic Women* offer thematic, easy-to-complete, inspirational books for small groups. These books can be completed individually at home and then discussed as a group, or your group can complete the reading and answer the discussion questions during your weekly meeting time.

### **Current Stay Connected Journals:**

- ⇒ *The Gift of Invitation: 7 Ways Jesus Invites You to a Life of Grace*, by Allison Gingras, the creator of the *Stay Connected Journals*
- ⇒ *Exploring the Catholic Classics: How Spiritual Reading Can Help You Grow in Wisdom*, by Tiffany Walsh
- ⇒ *Invite the Holy Spirit into Your Life: Growing in Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control*, by Deanna G. Bartalini

### **Distributing Books**

When it comes to making sure everyone has a book, there are a couple of options. The Group Leader or Facilitator can order them all for the group (Collect money beforehand if funding the purchase is a concern.), or you can have each member responsible for getting her own book

I usually try to order a few extra copies so that I can accommodate any last-minute registrations. I rarely get stuck with an unused book; when I do the Lord has used it in some remarkable

ways. Either it blesses someone as a gift or is offered for free as a scholarship for someone in the group. To be honest, giving a book is a GREAT way to invite somebody (who may be reluctant) to the group; it is actually how I started participating in small group. The book, given to me as a gift, got me through the door, and then the amazing sisterhood and the yummy snacks kept me coming.

## Choose a Format

### Time frame:

- ⇒ 90 to 120 minutes is recommended
- ⇒ Important: Start and end on time. Your participants will appreciate it and will be more likely to stay with it if they can count on consistency.

### Hospitality

- ⇒ Snacks or no snacks. If decide on refreshments, provide a sign-up sheet.

## Speaking of Snacks

To snack, or not to snack, that is the question.

Since I seriously lack the “mad Martha skills” that many of my contemporaries have, my choice is usually not to snack. I do provide beverages—coffee, tea, and water. If you would like to offer snacks but are not a Betty Crocker-type or you do not wish to shoulder the weekly snack expense, I suggest a sign-up sheet. Many people enjoy being able to contribute with something as simple as a snack, especially if someone else has graciously taken care of organizing and/or hosting the group. Another “trust me on this” recommendation: be sure you have a sign-up sheet so that you don’t have a buffet one week and nothing the next.

## Facilitators

There should be someone who serves as a guide for each small group. This person is not a teacher or leader, so there is no stress to know answers or even to prepare anything beyond the regular week’s readings. A facilitator simply helps keep time, guides participates through the reading and discussion questions, and, when necessary, helps to keep conversations balanced.

## Helpful Facilitator Hints

When you bring together many personalities to discuss spiritual matters, there are bound to be situations that need to be addressed. Some participants may be more chatty than others, which may leave some people at the table feeling excluded from conversations or unsure of how to get a word in. Sometimes opinions can be shared with gentleness and love; other times a more staunch or heavy-handed approach is taken. Although we are all one body in Christ, that doesn't mean the parts will always play well together. In order to keep the group from becoming imbalanced or "sick" the facilitator needs to be proactive in establishing group expectations. Furthermore, the facilitator has to be aware of the group's personalities and communication styles. A prayer to the Holy Spirit for sensitivity and wisdom before each meeting never hurts either! The key to keeping the focus on Christ is to remember the reason we've come together and to be ready with many tactics and techniques because there is really no ONE way to insure a friendly, spiritually fruitful group!

## Keeping the Group on Point

Pray throughout each session—before you arrive, during (especially with the others), and after!

Keep your eyes on the group. Watch for body language cues; a disengaged or upset participant may manifest as someone who never looks up or has her arms crossed. Be particularly mindful of reactions to what is being said or shared. Is the person who was once fully engaged suddenly distant or distracted? You may choose to address issues on the spot without embarrassing or calling anyone out, or make a note to check in with them after the sharing.

A great "trick" to assuring even vocal participation is to keep hash marks discreetly on your own study material. If Joy has shared on every questions but Sam has yet to speak, this may require you to be more active in the conversation. In this situation, I would intentionally make eye contact with Sam on the next question, even give a gentle encouraging nod if appropriate. (But remember to never ever call on someone; that is an introvert's worst fear!) Joy's enthusiasm and desire to engage can be utilized in recruiting her to assist you in getting others to share. Be sure to remind her that we are not there to make anyone uncomfortable or call people out, but perhaps even allowing a few moments before she offers an answer might give a more reserved person time to gather her thoughts and/or courage to speak.

Giving reading assignments and, when possible, questions ahead of time can also help "level the speaking field," which is why the *Stay Connected Journals* offer a wide variety of questions to help guide reflection and interaction with the materials and each other. As mentioned above, some people by nature are quick to process and share while others need more time to digest the material and formulate responses. It is also very important to be aware that neither is a better way.}

It is all about personality and temperaments, and being able to meet each person for who she is will bring INCREDIBLE blessings to your small group meetings!

## Dealing with the “Derailer”

Lastly, I want to touch on the inevitable inclusion of the “derailer.” This person can actually change from meeting to meeting depending on the topic of discussion and how it may relate to their current life circumstances. Remember that your objective in the group is to support each other spiritually. It is not that the group can’t ever engage on a personal level especially if someone is experiencing a difficult time; the challenge is to not let it overtake each meeting. Maybe that sounds harsh, but some women will feel that they have not signed up for that, they have come to learn about Jesus and the Catholic faith and to strengthening their spiritual life. Counseling participants week after week can become toxic to the group dynamics.

There are a few ways to handle this situation:

- ⇒ You can allow the person to share for a few extra moments (particularly if it is her first time opening up on this issue and especially if it IS relevant to the chapter topic).
- ⇒ If it is close to a break time, find a natural break (though it may not necessarily end the conversation) and call for snack or bathroom break. Then either you or another member can have a more personal conversation with that person so she feels heard and valued without the derailing.
- ⇒ When the behavior becomes habitual and chronic, a more stern approach will be needed. That is always a discussion away from the meeting and needs to be covered in lots of prayer! I have seen people leave groups for many reasons, the most frequent of which is the group feeling like a therapy session. \*\*For the record, the other reason people leave is from the feeling of being under attack every time they share. Be cautious of those exchanges as well.

The most important step to facilitating a small group faith sharing is to pray for the group and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

## Sample Agendas

*Stay Connected Journals* are formatted to make facilitating a group easy. They include opening and closing prayers, discussion questions, and a downloadable copy of all the Scripture verses.

Here are 2 sample agendas you can follow:

**When Material is Read Ahead of Time (1 ½-hour format, but can follow a 2-hour format)**

**7:00** Welcome the group, take care of bookkeeping, and pray the opening prayer.

**7:15** Invite the group to turn to the reading. Ask if anyone has anything to share from these pages or the “Invitation to Ponder” section.

**7:35** Connect to Scripture. Go through each Scripture verse; read them aloud and discuss how each touched your heart.

**8:00** Optional break. (*My group has snacks on the table and does not break.*)

**8:00 (8:15 with break)** Discuss answers to “Invitation to Share” questions.

**8:25** Pray the closing prayer.

*Or...*

**When Material Is Not Read Ahead of Time (2-hour format)**

**7:00** Welcome the group, take care of bookkeeping, and pray the opening prayer.

**7:10** Invite the group to turn to the reading. Read together. Conclude with the “Invitation to Ponder” question.

**7:35** Connect to Scripture. Go through each Scripture verse; read them aloud and discuss how each touched your heart.

**8:00** Optional break. (*My group has snacks on the table and does not break.*)

**8:00 (8:15 with break)** Read the Scripture reflection.

**8:15 (8:30)** Discuss answers to “Invitation to Share” questions.

**8:55** Pray closing prayer.



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