

SMALL GROUP

LEADER'S SUPPORT



Dear Small Group Leader,

Thank you, it is not always easy to respond yes to an invitation to step into a place of leadership. Your docility to the Holy Spirit and the response to the stirring in your heart when you answered this call to be a small group leader is the place that I pray your heart will remain as you continue to journey in this experience. This docility to the Holy Spirit is an openness to God which empowers us to live out a truly authentic missionary spirituality.

As you embark on this beautiful and vulnerable journey **into the deep** with the men and women in your small group I want to encourage you to not be overly concerned with the end results, but rather to always keep your eyes fixed upon our Lord, especially as he reveals himself in those around you. Do not stress about the success, have courage knowing it is He who directs the fruits that *He* wants to grow in you and those around you. The materials and knowledge to be gained from them are good, but the most important aspect of these small groups is deepening authentic and personal relationships with those you are journeying with.

Please know of my deep gratitude for you! I will be praying and fasting for you and all those in your small group!

God bless,



Rob Stamper
Director of Young Adult Outreach
Echo Community

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Mt 5:16

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ECHO COMMUNITY

While he was the archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła wrote his master work on the human person, sexuality, marriage, and celibacy. Soon after completing the work, he would become Pope John Paul II and restructure the work to be presented to the world in his general Wednesday audiences. From 1979 to 1984 he presented 129 of his 135 written audiences which would become known as *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*.

On February 20, 1980 St. John Paul II presented his 19th *General Audience* on Theology of the Body. It is from this audience that Echo Community has taken its name:

After original sin...The discovery of the spousal meaning of the body was to cease being for them a simple reality of revelation and of grace. Yet, this meaning was to remain...inscribed in the depths of the human heart as a **distant echo** of original innocence (TOB 19:2).

This distant echo etched on each of our hearts is the remnant of authentic human love we seek to remind men and women of. Original sin shattered our understanding of **who we are** and the understanding of our responsibility to guard our own dignity and that of others. In continually coming to understand our identity and our mission ever deeper we grow ever more aware of the freedom of the gift.

Through small groups this reality is made tangible because we are afforded the opportunity to brush up against this gift lived out through others in our community. "It is not good that man should be alone," and in fact we can not truly know who we are and understand our mission if we are alone (Gen 2:18). Being in relationship with others allows us to see more clearly through the veil of shame the truth of our own identity.

FIVE CORE PRINCIPLES

Our values denote what is important in our lives. How we live our lives expresses the authenticity of these values. To live our life for Jesus Christ requires us to live a specific way. There is not simply one way in which we can live our Catholic faith, but Echo Community does have a way to live that we want to invite you into for this time while you lead a small group.

The five core principles that we strive to live out as an Echo Community help us to order our lives as missionary disciples. These five core principles are: Prayer & Sacramental Life, Chastity, Vocational Culture, Missionary Spirituality, and Celebration.

PRAYER & SACRAMENTAL LIFE

“Mary, the first missionary disciple, teaches us by her *receptivity*. Mary, who is the model of the Church, opened up to God to such a capacity that God, Himself, dwelled in her. She allowed God to be God and move in the way that He knew best. It could be a temptation for us to think that because Mary was without sin, that this was somehow “easy” for her. However, Mary was not the perfect person because she had all the answers to her questions, but because she knew *where* to direct her questions. She knew that there was a profound mystery at work in her life, and she trusted that God would reveal those in His perfect time. Mary experienced many of the same fears we all experience, but she knew how to relate them to God rather than to keep them to herself. Scripture tells us often that ‘Mary pondered all of these things in her heart’...and who was intimately united to her heart? The Father, the Son, and her spouse, the Holy Spirit. Mary learned the essence of prayer [...] to relate to the God who has already given Himself to us” (Echo Community Missionary Journal | 2023, Adam Fuselier, pg 9).

Why prayer and the sacraments?

1. The Eucharist is *the* place where the Bridegroom joins to His bride. Our Lord in the Eucharist gives of himself to us and we are invited to respond by giving ourselves right back to him. This *real and tangible* gift disposes us to a position of awe and wonder of the greatness of God. Reception of the Eucharist is our permission to allow Christ to gaze upon us from within ourselves, here is where we become totally vulnerable, totally exposed, and totally loved by our Lord. In doing so, He reminds us of who we are and of his perfect desire to be in communion with us.
2. When our hearts are set on fire and we eagerly desire our hearts to be a dwelling place for our Lord...we naturally come to the realization that we regularly fall short. To strive for frequent confession is the rightly ordered way to seek the

mercy of God and to once again become whole so that we are a place worthy for our Lord to dwell.

3. Forming a life of regular daily prayer orients us to a deep and fruitful relationship with God. It is easy to think that a life of prayer is a task to place on our list of daily routines such as brushing our teeth or taking out the trash, but we must never forget that prayer is relationship and at the center of prayer is the reality that God has already given Himself to us and that,

“God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama” (CCC 2567).

For a last encouragement; when we find ourselves in doubt of our ability to pray well and to be pleasing to the Lord in time of prayer, we must humble ourselves as the disciples did and say, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (LK 11:1). You see, when we pray it is both God inviting us into prayer and directing us how to pray.

CHASTITY

Chastity, as defined by *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* is, “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman” (CCC 2337). The confusion of the world has degraded the virtue of chastity to an arbitrary list of “do’s and don’ts” but it is so much more than this.

“The bodily and spiritual ‘sense’ that must be redeemed in us for chastity to blossom is our sense of sight. Chastity involves being able to see ourselves and another rightly, to see...ourselves and the other as a gift, not as an object to be used or rejected...Because of sin, we can easily reduce a person to a means of easing hurt, bolstering our pride, to giving us pleasure, or for getting what we want” (Echo Community Missionary Journal | 2023, Adam Fuselier, pg 14).

Why cultivate the virtue of chastity?

1. Chastity must involve embracing the truth of one's identity, which is a task entrusted to every human person at every state in life.
2. We are all called to hold in the light the gift of the complementarity of men and women...we must embrace it, and we must boldly proclaim it!
3. Chastity frees us for authentic love in every circumstance, which is the call of every human person. Chastity is what creates the capacity for an authentic communion of persons...in friendship, in our vocation, and in every encounter we have.

VOCATIONAL CULTURE

One thing that we do at Echo Community with great intention and reverence is to provide living witnesses of men and women living out authentic love in their vocations. Through Echo Retreats and the Young Adult Outreach, we strive to give this great witness. We desire for men and women to possess a great reverence of the unique and unrepeatable story of their own journey as well as the journey of everyone they encounter. We also take great care to prioritize the foundational vocation we are all called to, which is **holiness**. Every man and woman, however they are called to live their life for God, are at the core of their vocation called to a life of holiness. God, who is Love, calls us to become fully who we are through loving others well. St. John Paul II calls living this way, "the spousal meaning of our bodies."

This spousal meaning of our bodies is lived out in our primary vocation...most commonly through the vocation of *celibacy* or *marriage*. Through these vocations men and women are called to make a gift of themselves to others...this is what creates a vocational culture...to be a gift-of-self.

How do you build a vocational culture?

1. To build this vocational culture within our own communities requires that we live our lives in an orderly manner. We must intentionally order our day around our relationship with God, our families, and our community of friends....in that order.
2. It is also important to take the time and love people where they are along the journey of discernment of their vocation. We are unique and unrepeatable gifts, which means that God works in unique ways for each of us.

3. We will touch on this more deeply in *creating a space for your small group*, but it is important to note here that cultivation of silence, allowing for the noise to fall away, gives us space as a community to recognize the voice of God. Cultivation of silence presents us with the opportunities needed to discover our vocations and to live them more fully.

“Whoever opens his heart to Christ will not only understand the mystery of his own existence, but also that of his own vocation; he will bear the abundant fruit of grace.”

– St. John Paul II, World Day of Prayer | April 17, 2005

MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY

“When we really dive into authentic missionary spirituality, we realize that missionary life has its foundations in **BEING** before **DOING**. When we live out of a place of security in who we are as sons and daughters of the Father, mission becomes more clear and we are more free to enter into it. Methods can be helpful, but when we begin to take the reins, we take our eyes off of Him...if the soil of our hearts is cultivated, formed, and ready, our work doesn’t just bear fruit...WE bear fruit. (Echo Community Missionary Journal | 2023, Adam Fuselier, pg 25).

How do we live a missionary spirituality?

1. First, it is important to know that ALL of the baptized are called to evangelize, no matter their state in life. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (MT 28:19).
2. We must be open to the action and activity of the Holy Spirit, we are called to cultivate docility in our hearts.
3. A missionary spirituality is one where we are called to “be with” God before we are called “to do” something for him.
4. The proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord is the center of the missionary activity of the Church, and therefore Christ is the center of our missionary spirituality.
5. Act with both urgency and patience in sharing the message of Christ with others.

6. Journey with others in the midst of their lives, being ready to propose at a pace inspired by the Holy Spirit, how Christ is the answer to every heart's deepest longing.
7. Lastly, we must be ready to invite others to "come and see". We must share the Gospel with others and invite them to Jesus and His Church.

CELEBRATION

It is so easy for us to fall into the cloudy day mentality, to see the mess of our culture, our family, our lives, and even in our hearts. We dwell upon the mess and confusion and fail to identify the great good that God has done and continues to do in everything around us. We become ungrateful and attempt to wrestle control fearing, oftentimes without naming it, that God does not really care if we are joyful or not.

"While we may not be marching to our own martyrdom, we all know that being a disciple is tough. However, as missionaries our celebration lies not only in what we see, hear, and experience now, but it lies in the hope of a blessed destiny! **In this way, celebration is ESCHATOLOGICAL!** It is a powerful sign of what is to come" (Echo Community Missionary Journal | 2023, Adam Fuselier, pg 29). And what is to come in the eschaton? A communion we are destined for, an eternal banquet of celebration, the perfection of virtues, a love beyond description, and a joy beyond our earthly imagination.

Why should we celebrate regularly?

1. Joy is the most powerful mark of the Christian. When we celebrate, that joy is made manifest through our bodies.
2. We are called to create a culture that affirms the dignity and gift of every human person – we have a duty to celebrate others!
3. Missionary zeal and freedom that comes from virtue allows for creative spontaneity in the field of evangelization.

FOUR EXPRESSIONS OF OUR MISSIONARY LIFE

To live a missionary life is to live a life for God through your service to others. This service to others is primarily ordered toward inviting men and women into relationship with Christ, through whom we have our redemption and salvation. Your "yes" to be a small group leader is a way of living a missionary life. At Echo Community, we have four specific pillars for living out this missionary life. They are **Intercession, Hospitality, Relational Ministry, and Witness & Teaching.**

In their own ways, these four pillars allow for us to see the Lord among us and to move in accordance with His desire for us and the others in our small groups. We will briefly cover each of these here and then provide some great details about them below.

1. **Intercession**

Praying for someone else is praying in the place of someone else, when we pray as a small group for a small group member's family, friend, or someone else important in their life we are standing before God in their place seeking His mercy for them.

The reality of intercession is us standing on the front line of the spiritual battle with Jesus...shoulder-to-shoulder we go to battle alongside Him.

To intercede well is to have a constant trust in our Lord and place all at his feet. It is paying attention to the movements in prayer, and to utilize all the tools in our arsenal (sacramentals, relics, etc)...

2. **Hospitality**

"The invisible is made visible through the physical." - Fr. Thomas Loya

At Echo Community we like to say, "**Love looks forward.**" We express a deep reverence for others when we can look outside of ourselves, to the situation in front of us, and anticipate what others might need in order for them to feel received and loved.

Through hospitality we come to manifest the Father's provision and care – after all – everything we have is from the Father and in providing to others we return the gift of the Father back to Him.

Hospitality done well is to affirm the goodness of those we are blessed to serve. It's here that we do lots of small things with great love, and with great love the little things become big things.

3. **Relational Ministry**

"Removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other" - Pope Francis

Accompaniment and journeying with others places us as missionaries in our rightful place – we are not the "sage on the stage" but rather the "guide on the side," we walk alongside those we serve and together are led by Christ.

Relational ministry is united to our hospitality through the effort and importance of creating a space of reverence – to receive others as they come and love them where they are. In so doing, the love we express pushes past the awkward

moments to love the individuals as unique and unrepeatable persons and **not** as problems to be solved.

“Love refuses every impulse to close in upon itself.” - Pope Francis

4. Witness & Teaching

“Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” - Pope St. Paul VI

Just as we stated in the expression of Relational Ministry, we are not walking with others as an expert set aside or as the “one with all the answers.” Through being a witness we can come to teach others by how we live even more than by what we say.

There is a right order to how we live out this expression of missionary spirituality. First, we must bear witness to the teachings and the Truth. This means we are called to be bold, courageous, and simple in proclaiming the truth, trusting God will nourish the seeds we are planting, even when the Church’s teachings are unpopular. Yet, if we embody the truth in love, we give those truths the best chance to be received. We live out the Gospel and then through that living of the Gospel we teach those we walk with.

To live as a witness requires us to love as Christ loved, to love with the truth of His teachings in our hearts. Love without truth is empty, and truth without love is cold. This requires us to stay sharpened, be bold, and be creative in how we walk with others! In small groups we are afforded the opportunity to live this out by sharing how Christ has worked in our own lives. Small groups also invite us to stretch and learn how to share this gift with.

Our greatest example of our missionary spirituality is Christ himself:

“Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, **Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;**” LK 24:13-15

As Christ walked with the two men he did so from alongside them, not ahead. He first listened, but when asked a question he responded with deep reverent love. He poured himself out and into them always while viewing them as the unique and unrepeatable persons they were.

LEADING AND HOSTING A SMALL GROUP MEETING

CREATING THE SPACE

As mentioned above, through hospitality we say that “Love looks forward.” By paying attention to the details, meeting physical needs and spiritual needs through ongoing intercession and building a peaceful, ordered environment, we essentially create a space for people to have their hearts open, free to encounter the truth, goodness and beauty of God and neighbor.

FIRST MEETING

Set the tone. The first time that you meet as a small group should be the model for the rest of meetings together. Your attitude is the attitude you will want your small group to have. If you are warm, inviting, and intentional about the meeting then you will come to see that mirrored in the participants. On the other hand, if you are unsure, move with hesitation, and lack direction this too will be reflected in the group and likely result in a lack of commitment.

Don’t rush. When we are doing something for the first time it is easy out of nervousness to rush. Make sure you progress slowly yet intentionally through the meeting's objectives to build intimacy and depth in the group.

Stick to your set time. A very important habit to set from the very first meeting is sticking to the set length for your small group meetings. If you are meeting for 60 minutes, then meet for 60-minutes and do not go over. Encourage people who want to socialize to come over about 30-minutes early so they have time beforehand to talk and catch up, but when the meeting starts, stick to the time. Suggestions for socializing beforehand could include, food, cornhole or other yard games, snacks, board games, icebreakers, or other joyful and carefree celebrations!

We are all very busy, and it can be a discouragement to commit to an ongoing group if time is not respected. Some people will want to stay longer or start earlier and that is great, but you **must** stay consistent to the set time that the small group is set for and be respectful of others time. This is one of the most common reasons why men and women stop coming to a group.

Start on time and end on time.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

We are physical creatures as much as we are spiritual so the physical spaces we are in matter. This means we should be encouraged to have spaces that are clean, orderly, and inviting, that create a place for others to be received. At Echo Community we like to

say “lamps, plants, and rugs.” When creating an especially inviting place these simple accents help with the physical environment because they make us feel “at home.” More on that in the section below on hospitality!

- Make sure the places in your home that small group participants will be in are clean and orderly – especially from anything that will be distracting from the meeting’s objectives such as dirty dishes, clothes on the floor, cluttered end tables or coffee tables.
- The space should be large enough that everyone can sit in a comfortable circle at eye level with each other. **Eye level is important** – everyone needs to be on the same level and looked in the eye when they are talking. There should not be people in chairs, others on the ground, and others standing. When everyone is on the same physical plane it eliminates distractions and encourages people to be more open to sharing.
- Strive to be comfortable and relaxed, but attentive and respectful...it is a balance.

SPIRITUAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical can not make visible the invisible if there is not an intentional reverence for the spiritual.

- Be sure that every small group meeting opens and closes in prayer. This prayer should take place once everyone is seated together comfortably in a circle. Remember that it is first God who calls us to prayer (CCC 2567), and it is God who comes first in all things; it is through Him that all things flow and it is for Him that all things are done. Opening prayer should not be done in a rushed way, but also not long and drawn out. We do not aspire to “teach” while praying, but to pray with sincerity, from the heart, and directly to Our Lord with the intimacy that He has granted to us.
- Become comfortable with the silence, welcome it and let it sit. In the first meeting, the silence in the group can feel a little “awkward” but silence is good. Think of silence in two ways, the first being a “pregnant” silence and the second a “dead” silence. A pregnant silence is one where something is stirring in the group, there is a tension as people ponder but it will “birth” conversation. A dead silence is a hollow space and is one to “breathe” into, it is one for you to speak life into and encourage others to speak as well. It will take practice, but have courage, be comfortable sitting in the little awkward moments, and you will come to recognize the difference!
- Last, but not least, keep confidentiality. Creating a space that is inviting will invite vulnerability. People will **put out into the deep** only if they feel comfortable and know that what they share in the group will stay in the group.

HOSPITALITY

HOSPITALITY AND THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Connected to creating a space that is both physically and spiritually inviting is hospitality. Hospitality in its own way allows for the environment to be even more receptive. However, hospitality should not only be dependent on the host, it is also an opportunity for the participants to make a gift-of-self themselves and to serve others.

- Encourage other participants to make a gift of themselves by bringing a snack or some drinks each time you meet
- Think about organizing a list that everyone can have access to where they can sign up and let people know what they are going to bring.
- Snacks, desserts, and drinks add an extra layer to the environment, help people be more comfortable, and encourage them to keep returning and seeing the value of the group.
- When thinking about the environment, think about how others might feel in the space. If it is a cooler place that you are meeting you might want to consider having a couple blankets available for anyone who might want one.
- Candles and warm lights really help create an environment conducive to deep, reflective conversations.
- Light instrumental music playing while people arrive and during time for general conversation is helpful too, but should be turned off before opening in prayer.

CREATING HEALTHY VULNERABILITY

Creating a space that is inviting and where people feel received places them in a disposition more open to share who they truly are and even to discover a deeper part of who they are. This is a very good thing and something that we desire to encourage so that relationships can grow and thrive in the small group. It is however proper of us to recognize important boundaries and protect everyone's innocence.

As a small group it is good to be challenged into a place of discomfort in vulnerability because it helps us grow in the virtuous life. The evil one also flees in the face of courage. However, it is a bit of a dance and a tension that must be held, you can “veil” certain details while at the same time being vulnerable and retaining the fullness of truth with what you convey. For example, if you are struggling, or have struggled with the sin of pornography, you can express the struggle and the challenges of this sin in your life without giving details of moments when you have fallen to this sin.

HOW TO CREATE HEALTHY VULNERABILITY

- Remember to set the example, be the one to open the floor if needed and share an important part of who you are, something that opens you to being vulnerable to others

- Be patient, the first couple of meetings might need to happen before people start to really open up
- Be attentive to everyone in the group. If someone is holding back and not participating in the group, reach out to them individually and check in with them. We do not want to force someone into sharing, but it is important that everyone in the group is participating fully.
- If someone starts to share something uncomfortable with the group that they really feel they need someone to process with them on, **and you are comfortable pulling them aside after** the meeting to talk more, then it would be up to you if you wanted to enter into that conversation at an appropriate time and place.

CREATING A CULTURE OF RECEPTIVITY AND AFFIRMATION

The culmination of creating a space, offering hospitality, and modeling healthy vulnerability lend themselves to the creation of a small group culture that is receptive and affirming of those who are in the group. When we speak on receptivity and affirmation, we are simply speaking about the receptivity and affirmation of the persons who are present. We want everyone who is in the group to feel welcomed and encouraged to participate.

Sometimes the teachings of the Church and the will of God can be difficult to reconcile in our lives. Some people struggle more than others with specific teachings. What is important is that we are receptive and affirming of them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. This does not mean we cast aside the teachings of the Church or the will of God and make excuses for someone's past or current struggles. However, it does mean we step into the difficult spaces and love them for who they truly are made in the image and likeness of God.

WHAT A CULTURE OF RECEPTIVITY AND AFFIRMATION LOOKS LIKE

- When someone is speaking everyone should be looking them in the eyes. That way, as the person looks around to others in the group they see they have everyone's attention.
- As people ponder and work out things aloud to the group, nods of affirmation and welcoming looks are encouraging to the person.
- Cultivate trust in the group by letting people disagree and to have dialogue with each other.
- No one person is the "teacher" in the group. Remember that everyone is walking alongside each other, learning together, and wrestling together. If someone does start to step into the "teacher" role as the small group leader it is important to pull them aside afterwards and remind them of the purpose of the group.
- Affirm the goodness of each person when they share, especially when they share challenging things.

MOVING PAST SMALL GROUPS

Organized and structured small groups are a fantastic way to cultivate community and relationships. However, when small groups come to the end of a book, program, or some other type of content, it is very easy for the community to split up and pitter out. The deeper purpose of a small group is to view it as a launching point for a community of friends to develop and grow deeper in relationship with each other. When the content is done, when the book has been read, don't let it be the end of the community – continue on!

WHAT TO DO ONCE THE SMALL GROUP ENDS

It is important to note that it is completely okay if the group does not continue connecting after the content comes to a close, but we want to encourage you to be open to the possibilities of something ongoing and organic so here are a few suggestions to lean into that!

- As a group, reflect on what you liked and disliked about the group. Would you want different types of content, or a different book to use? Was the time of week or time of day difficult, or was the amount of work too much during the week? Were the discussions deep and meaningful? What were some great highlights from the time spent together?
- Do you feel like continuing as a group with something new? Would you like to take a break, but start back up again?
- Maybe consider a monthly dinner together to check in and see how everyone is doing, or a weekend coffee meet up for a check-in with the group once a month or so.
- Do you feel called to a service activity in your wider community or to starting something at your parish?

It is important to note that some people will be content with not continuing on with the group, and others might feel drawn to start their own group. Whatever the choices are of the people in the group supporting them in that choice, it is important for people to know they have complete freedom to choose continuing on as a community or seeking somewhere else that the Lord is calling them to.