

REOPENING GUIDANCE FOR GROUPS DECEMBER 2020

As of December 2020, all MBC Locations except for our Montgomery County Location are in Phase Three of reopening. Montgomery County remains in Phase Two.

Since all locations are at a minimum of Phase Two of reopening, limited in-person gatherings are permitted. However, due to the recent increase in COVID-19 cases in the greater DC area, we recommend that MBC groups continue to meet online during the winter season.

We know this is difficult! We are all feeling “zoom-fatigue” and long for groups to meet in person once again. Until that is possible, we are providing this document to offer guidance to our group leaders and group members as you navigate important decisions as groups navigate this winter season.

In this document you will find:

1. General Guidance for MBC Small Groups
2. Ideas for Welcoming New Group Members Virtually
3. Ideas for Making Online Prayer Times Meaningful
4. Creative Ideas for Hybrid Group Meetings (When and if possible)
5. Guidance on Offering Comfort During Challenging Times

GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR MBC SMALL GROUPS

Many are asking “Is it now safe to meet in groups in our homes?” The answer to that question, in a very technical sense, is that there is still a risk of community coronavirus transmission associated with larger meetings, both for you personally and for those who might meet with you in your home. Greater Washington, DC is an area of high population density and high levels of regional, national and international travel. All of these factors, together with sustained levels of confirmed positive test results, indicate that there is still community virus transmission present in our cities. In light of this reality, it is recommended that your group continue meeting online for the winter months.

If you do choose to meet in person there are steps that you can take to decrease the risk of virus transmission. Our review of local, state and federal guidance on this issue indicates the following:

- **Outdoor gatherings are safer than indoor gatherings.** If and when possible, we would *strongly* recommend that your groups meet outdoors if you choose to meet in person. This might mean meeting in backyards, or driveways, or local parks. It might also mean that everyone brings a lawn chair, and that meeting days or meeting times may need to be flexible in light of the weather. Groups that chose to meet indoors for the winter may consider a temporarily split into even smaller groups so that indoor groups can remain socially distanced.
- **Social distancing is still required.** In each and every phase of reopening, every jurisdiction around the country mandates maintaining at least six feet of distance from anyone who is not in your household. In indoor settings (such as the potential return to school and the reopening of exercise establishments), some jurisdictions are requiring more than ten feet of separation, especially if singing is involved.
- **Implement and enforce symptom verification.** In our new normal, larger gatherings will now require some form of verification that attendees are 1) not currently experiencing symptoms of COVID-19; and 2) have not been exposed to anyone who is experiencing symptoms or who has received a positive diagnosis of COVID-19. This verification can be done in advance of each meeting by text or email, by written waiver in advance of your first attendance in person, or by agreement from the entire group as you make the decision to begin meeting again.
- **Masks are still encouraged and permissible.** In light of varying individual responses and risk tolerances associated with reopening, many people have made personal decisions on when (and when not) to wear a mask. Virginia and Maryland law both require a mask for any public gathering indoors. In addition, masks are strongly encouraged in other circumstances, including for older or more vulnerable populations.
- **Do not shake hands or hug.** This will be a huge temptation for almost everyone, and a huge loss for many of us. In this unique season, though, we strongly recommend that social distance be maintained, even with close friends.
- **Provide hand sanitizer.** It is possible to transmit the coronavirus through the use of shared surfaces such as doorknobs, tables, etc. To help reduce the risk of shared use transmission, the CDC recommends the liberal use of hand sanitizer in public settings.

In addition to the guidelines above, we also want to share a few principles that every group should consider as you navigate the decision on whether to meet again in person when conditions improve or a vaccine is made available:

- **Be Understanding.** While some members may want to meet together in person, not all group members may feel comfortable doing so, and that's ok! If others choose to not meet in person, look for ways to include them when you do gather (e.g. - video conference them in).
- **Be Considerate of Your Host's Home.** If your group is meeting in someone's backyard or home, go out of your way to make sure you respect the "rules of the home" (e.g. what entrance or restroom to use, would they like individuals to wash hands on arrival, what parts of the house/property should people avoid, etc...). You might even have the group host communicate any house rules ahead of time so everyone knows what to expect. As group members arrive and are not sure if the host is comfortable with something, encourage them to not assume, but rather to ask questions to get clarification.
- **Be Respectful of Neighbors and Neighborhoods.** If groups are meeting in people's homes, it's important to realize that various neighbors might not be at the same comfort level as your group when it comes to meeting together. Please keep this in mind in how/where you park and where you walk. Maintain social distancing!
- **Be Smart Regarding Food.** As much as we love to be good hosts, we recommend that people bring their own food/snacks/drinks rather than setting out items for people to share.
- **A Note About Kids.** Many younger children cannot social distance and/or wear a mask. We know there is no hard and fast rule governing the specific ages of children that might be able to observe specific rules for specific lengths of time. Out of an abundance of caution, however, we recommend that groups with children continue to meet online for now.

IDEAS FOR WELCOMING NEW GROUP MEMBERS VIRTUALLY

Joining a group as a new person in this season has a lot of challenges, especially if the group is meeting virtually. In light of that, here are a few quick ways that you and your group members can help new folks feel welcome and included in your group.

- **Take Time to Get to Know New Members.** It may be wise to pause your study/discussion to learn more about the new individual/couple and, if applicable, their family. You could use ice breakers or consider sharing testimonies to learn more about each other's lives. You might even consider meeting in-person outside while the weather is still somewhat warm if your group members are comfortable doing so. This might set your group up for even deeper connection for the weeks ahead should the group return to meeting online. Whatever your strategy, think creatively about what you can do to help these individuals enter into your group well.
- **Be Patient as New Members Adjust.** It took all of us a while to adjust to meeting in an online setting back in March, and these individuals might also need the same grace. They might not be eager to speak up at first, and that's okay. Allow extra silence (e.g., the "Zoom pause..") to allow people time to share. Lord willing, they will become more comfortable with time. You might even think of creative ways to utilize the chat feature so that more people have the opportunity to chime in.
- **Intentionally Reach Out to New Members During the Week.** Online groups grow in their sense of closeness when there's connection between meetings. That could be as simple as a text or audio message, or even a phone call. If you're comfortable doing so, you might even offer to meet for coffee. Reaching out in some fashion to see how they are doing can go a long way! You might even consider asking others from the group to do the same. When reaching out, ask the new members how they felt about their first week in the group, and what they thought about the discussion. Thank them for their contributions and encourage them to persevere through the next few weeks. These little gestures can help them feel like a valued member of the community.

Again, entering into a group in this season is not easy. But, with some intentionality and consistency, we can provide a welcoming environment where new members can share their lives with others and grow more in their likeness to Jesus.

IDEAS FOR MAKING ONLINE PRAYER TIMES MEANINGFUL

(Adapted from a talk by Kelly King at Lifeway)

Leading prayer during a virtual group does not have to be dull and mechanical! The following tips and ideas might help you intentionally design your group's prayer times to be more engaging and fruitful.

- **Plan Out your Prayer Times.** A little preparation goes a long way! Just as you plan out your group time, give your prayer times some of the same intentional thought and preparation based on where you want to lead your group members. You might even ask members to turn off their cameras during prayer to help them focus.
- **Identify a Scribe.** Sometimes, sharing prayer requests often takes time away from actually praying. Consider asking someone to write down people's prayer requests as they are being prayed. This might allow for more prayer time as a group, and the list can be shared with the group afterwards to be prayed through during the week.
- **Use Breakout Rooms.** Consider using the breakout room feature to put people into smaller prayer groups so more people have the opportunity to pray. It also might be less intimidating for someone to pray out loud with fewer people around.
- **Creatively Involve Others.** Some people may not want to pray out loud no matter what setting they are in, and that's ok! You might assign these folks Scriptures to read during prayer times. They might even read an assigned psalm as you begin to guide people's prayers as well.
- **Develop Simple Prayer Prompts.** In order to give people as many opportunities to pray as possible, sometimes it can be helpful to give group members the beginning of a one-sentence prayer you'd like people to complete (e.g. "Jesus we praise you because [fill in the blank]..."). Come up with these ahead of time and allow people to take turns "popcorn praying." If they speak over each other at times, that's ok!
- **Designate a Prayer Lead.** As a leader, you already have much to coordinate with the group. You might consider appointing someone to your group as the Prayer Lead to help with the coordination of sending requests each week. They might even assist you in developing specific prayer activities for group time as well.

Finally, be sensitive to Spirit as you lead, and be willing to stop and pray at any point in your meeting if you sense the need. Know that we're praying for each of you as you lead as well!

CREATIVE IDEAS FOR HYBRID MEETINGS

During a pandemic we need to be creative to find ways to connect well. When more things open up and case counts decrease, some groups may choose a hybrid model of meeting both online and in-person. We continue to recommend online gatherings, but for those who choose to meet in a hybrid context, the following tips maybe helpful.

- **Think Outside the Box.** For some, this means that each week some group members meet in-person while others join the same meeting online. For some groups, this means that although the weekly meetings remain online for all, they prioritize smaller in-person connections between meetings. Find what works for your group.
- **Be Flexible and Give Grace.** Chances are high that not all members will be ready to resume meeting in person at the same time. Offering multiple options to join may be a way to love your neighbor and communicate understanding to those who situations and needs might not match your own.
- **Be Intentional to Include Those Joining Online in Pre or Post Meeting Fellowship.** In a hybrid situation, where some are joining in person and some online, it can be easy to default to the needs of those physically meeting together. You might consider starting the online meeting as soon as any in-person guests arrive so they can be a part of any pre-meeting fellowship and keeping the meeting link live until any post-meeting fellowship is finished.
- **Plans Ways to Invite Online Participants to Talk and Engage.** In a hybrid situation it may be difficult for online participants to join the conversation when those in person are talking. You may choose to insert pauses in the conversation and specifically ask for input from online participants who may have a harder time knowing when to speak up. You may ask online participants to electronically “raise their hand” or note in the chat function that they have something to say. You may consider asking online participants to lead the prayer time or read scripture to the group.
- **Plan Technology Well.** When possible, consider connecting the online meeting to a larger screen where all participants can easily see the faces of those joining online. Consider your lighting, audio connection and the location of the camera so online participants can see and hear well.

GUIDANCE ON OFFERING COMFORT IN CHALLENGING TIMES

(Adopted from the Village Church)

A major aspect we are hearing in our church body is that some are facing job loss and others significant pay reductions. And many of us may be asking (or expecting) if we are next.

How will we minister to one another through the suffering and loss that comes our way in this pandemic? The answer is comfort. “A shock absorber system in a car doesn’t eliminate the bumps in the road,” Tim Keller says, “but it keeps the car from being shaken into pieces by the bumps. You have to have sources of comfort and strength when you go through suffering—not that it eliminates the suffering, but that suffering won’t actually shake you to pieces.”

Job had three friends (a small group, you might say). They show up, and from chapter 3 all the way into the 20s, they speak to Job in cycles to try to comfort him, to try to help him interpret and understand his suffering. And they do an absolutely terrible job of comforting.

Yet, even by looking at how they don’t comfort well, we can learn something about where sources of comfort can come from as we care for one another in group life.

Bad Comfort

Eliphaz brings a list (Job 4-5). He brings the so-called logic and principles. He’s heard Job crying out in agony. And Eliphaz tells his suffering friend, “Stop your belly-aching, stop your praying, stop your emoting and blubbering. Figure out what you’re doing wrong, where you can get another (better) job, pull yourself together, and get back out there.”

This doesn’t grasp the biblical complexity of human existence. A checklist of questions like, “Have you sinned? Are you believing the promises? Are you confessing sins? Are you reading your Bible? Are you doing your spiritual disciplines? You gotta figure out what God is trying to do here,” may not be what a group member in suffering needs. They may need you to listen, to cry. They may need a hug and ministry of presence, not words or lists. Better comfort is a ministry mix of truth and tears.

Better Comfort

Job responds to Eliphaz with his own self counseling (Job 6). You see this kind of example also in Psalm 42. Job does a healthier job and sets a model for how we might also comfort one another. Would that one of his small group members knew to provide such comfort! Job displayed better comfort through:

Emotional realism – Job expresses how he really feels—no cleaning it up. He does so in a small group of trusted friends and with God.

Prayer – In Job 6:8, he prays, admitting that he hopes God would really grant what he’s asking. Job says hard things about God, but he says them to God. He never stops praying. He stays in relationship with God.

Recognizing God’s keeping him – “I have not repudiated the words of the Holy One.” The one comfort he has is a clear conscience. He knows God loves him, accepts him, knows him. If you know God, you can comfort. You can be comforted—and kept.

Ultimate Comfort

Job said all of the above knowing that even in his initial response, he was prone to crack. No one has ever perfectly kept all the words of the Holy One. Except One. Jesus Christ could keep every word. He is praiseworthy and excellent. He was righteous and upright and was struck down and destroyed for our sin. He was the only true innocent sufferer, and He also defeated death once for all. If you have a relationship with Him, you are loved and kept.

A question from the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?”
Answer: “That I am not my own but belong, body and soul in life and death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ, who has paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and therefore by His Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for Him.”

