

Reconnect Groups

Rebuilding community after pandemic

A LEADER'S GUIDE



Thank you so much for your interest in hosting your very own four-week Reconnect Group! We hope it will be an experience that will bring much life-giving joy for you and your group members.

What is a Reconnect Group?

Reconnect Groups are brief four-week groups held both digitally and in-person which aim to provide an opportunity to regather as a community, become reacquainted with others, and share one's personal experience living through a once-in-a-century pandemic.

What Do I Need to Host a Group?

Digital Groups

1. A video conferencing platform
2. A reliable internet connection
3. Headphones (if in a loud environment)
4. Downloads of the session outlines

In-Person Groups

1. A meeting location (public or private)
2. Any desired hospitality (snacks, beverages, etc.)
3. A laptop or tablet if showing session videos
4. Printed copies of the session outlines

How Do I Host a Group?

We have done everything we could to make hosting a Reconnect Group as simple of a process as possible. Simply follow the three steps of **PRAY, PREPARE, PROCEED**.

PRAY

As the host of a Reconnect Group, you are enabling God to reach into the lives of those whom you will be hosting. You are in no way, shape, or form, responsible for changing anyone's life. Though we "plant and water", it is God who "causes the growth." Therefore spend some time before launching your Group asking the Holy Spirit to guide the right people to your group and to be present during your gatherings.

PREPARE

The key is a smooth and successful gathering is to be prepared. Read over the session outline, preview the personal story or video, and jot down your own personal responses to the provided discussion questions. This will allow you to have a feel for the gathering even before it takes place. On the day of your gathering, be sure to arrive at your digital or in-person meeting place in advance to address any technical or environmental issues.

PROCEED

The final step is to host. Follow the prompts listed on the session outline. Quick tips on leading small groups: 1. Don't do it alone 2. Just be you 3. Be prepared ahead of time 4. Be patient when asking questions 4. Break into smaller groups if necessary 5. Let others lead the discussion questions on occasion 6. Enjoy the journey 7. You are not alone; God is with you!

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SESSION ONE: LOSS & ENCOURAGEMENT

II Corinthians 1:3-4 *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God.”*

WELCOME | PRAYER | INTROS - (3-4 min)

Hello everyone and welcome! I am so glad that you could join us for our first Reconnect Group gathering. It is my hope that during this time together, that we will have the opportunity to relax, get to know each other on a more personal level, and share in some great discussion.

That being said, I would like to take a moment to share some expectations for this group.

1. What is shared here, stays here (*unless there is a risk of harm to self or others*).
2. Everyone is invited to participate, but no one is obligated.
3. We are respectful to the shared thoughts, insights, and reflections of others.
4. We seek to give everyone their fair share of time to contribute to the group.

Let us open this session in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be present:

“Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.”

ICEBREAKER QUESTION - (10 min)

[Insert icebreaker question here]

SHORT REFLECTION OR VIDEO - (8 min)

Purpose of Session: Listen to how participants experienced loss. Show empathy. For sample reflection, see the *Sample Reflections* section at the back of this packet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - (35 min)

1. What was it like for you watching the pandemic rapidly spreading across the globe?
2. What was the most difficult disruption or loss that the pandemic had in your life? Why?
3. How did you notice the pandemic affecting your physical, mental, or emotional well-being?
4. How were you encouraged by God and how do you feel this changes me or gives me new insights, affects my relationships with God and others or my journey as a disciple?

CLOSING & PRAYER - (5 min)

Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with the group today! It was such a joy to spend this time together with you all. As we bring this gathering to a close, I would like to ask if there are any intentions that anyone would like to bring to prayer? If so, please feel free to speak them aloud now. If you would prefer to keep them to yourself, that is okay too.

(After a time of intention sharing, lead the following prayer below)

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to gather and reconnect as a parish community. For all those intentions shared, and those which remain in the silence of our hearts, we offer them to you and to your merciful compassion, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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SESSION TWO: NEW BEGINNINGS

II Corinthians 5:17 *"So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come."*

WELCOME | PRAYER - (3 min)

Hello everyone and welcome! I am so glad that you could join us for our second Reconnect Group gathering. I would like to take a moment to remind us of our group expectations:

1. What is shared here, stays here (*unless there is a risk of harm to self or others*).
2. Everyone is invited to participate, but no one is obligated.
3. We are respectful to the shared thoughts, insights, and reflections of others.
4. We seek to give everyone their fair share of time to contribute to the group.

Let us open this session in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be present:

"Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen."

ICEBREAKER QUESTION - (10 min)

[Insert icebreaker question here]

SHORT REFLECTION OR VIDEO - (8 min)

Purpose of Session: Discussing how lockdown and mitigation during pandemic brought about positive change. For sample reflection, see the *Sample Reflections* section at the back of this packet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - (35 min)

1. How did the pandemic transform what things you value or prioritize in your daily life?
2. What was the most surprising thing you learned about yourself or others during quarantine?
3. Did you see God in this pandemic? His blessings? Or did you struggle to see God?
4. Did your relationship with God change? If so, how?

CLOSING & PRAYER - (5 min)

Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with the group today! It was such a joy to spend this time together with you all. As we bring this gathering to a close, I would like to ask if there are any intentions that anyone would like to bring to prayer? If so, please feel free to speak them aloud now. If you would prefer to keep them to yourself, that is okay too.

(After a time of intention sharing, lead the following prayer below)

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Rebuilding community after pandemic

SESSION THREE: ACCOMPANIED BY OTHERS

Eccl 4:9-10 "Two are better than one: they get a good wage for their labor. If the one falls, the other will lift up his companion."

WELCOME | PRAYER - (2 min)

Hello everyone and welcome! I am so glad that you could join us for our third Reconnect Group gathering. I would like to take a moment to remind us of our group expectations:

1. What is shared here, stays here (*unless there is a risk of harm to self or others*).
2. Everyone is invited to participate, but no one is obligated.
3. We are respectful to the shared thoughts, insights, and reflections of others.
4. We seek to give everyone their fair share of time to contribute to the group.

Let us open this session in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be present:

"Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen."

ICEBREAKER QUESTION - (10 min)

[Insert icebreaker question here]

SHORT REFLECTION OR VIDEO - (8 min)

Purpose of Session: Feeling helped and equipped with each new threshold or challenge of life. For sample reflection, see the *Sample Reflections* section at the back of this packet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - (35 min)

1. Where do you go to for the answers? Who do you trust most and why?
2. Did you grow up in a family or do you live in a household where those who are closest to you check in with one another? Family dinner or other daily shared experiences?
3. Was there any safe space to be vulnerable enough to share your accomplishments and failures? If so, what was it?
4. With any new threshold in your life (i.e. newly engaged, married, parent, divorced, widowed, etc.) who is that trusted person that helps you? How has faith in God helped you in such times?

CLOSING & PRAYER - (5 min)

Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with the group today! It was such a joy to spend this time together with you all. As we bring this gathering to a close, I would like to ask if there are any intentions that anyone would like to bring to prayer? If so, please feel free to speak them aloud now. If you would prefer to keep them to yourself, that is okay too.

(After a time of intention sharing, lead the following prayer below)

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to gather and reconnect as a parish community. For all those intentions shared, and those which remain in the silence of our hearts, we offer them to you and to your merciful compassion, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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SESSION FOUR: ACCOMPANIED BY JESUS

Jeremiah 29:11-13 *“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you,” says the LORD, “plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me”*

WELCOME | PRAYER - (2 min)

Hello everyone and welcome! I am so glad that you could join us for our fourth Reconnect Group gathering. I would like to take a moment to remind us of our group expectations:

1. What is shared here, stays here (*unless there is a risk of harm to self or others*).
2. Everyone is invited to participate, but no one is obligated.
3. We are respectful to the shared thoughts, insights, and reflections of others.
4. We seek to give everyone their fair share of time to contribute to the group.

Let us open this session in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to be present:

“Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.”

ICEBREAKER QUESTION - (10 min)

[Insert icebreaker question here]

SHORT REFLECTION OR VIDEO - (8 min)

Purpose of Session: Explore ways how faith in Jesus can be relevant in your life going forward. For sample reflection, see the *Sample Reflections* section at the back of this packet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - (35 min)

1. Has living through this pandemic caused you to lean more heavily on God or less? Why?
2. Why have you chosen to continue or strengthen your friendship with Jesus?
3. How would you describe your current friendship with Jesus? Where do you encounter him in life?
4. What would a deeper friendship with Jesus look like for you and your life?

CLOSING & PRAYER - (5 min)

Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts and insights with the group today! It was such a joy to spend this time together with you all. As we bring this gathering to a close, I would like to ask if there are any intentions that anyone would like to bring to prayer? If so, please feel free to speak them aloud now. If you would prefer to keep them to yourself, that is okay too.

(After a time of intention sharing, lead the following prayer below)

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to gather and reconnect as a parish community. For all those intentions shared, and those which remain in the silence of our hearts, we offer them to you and to your merciful compassion, though Christ Our Lord. Amen.

SAMPLE REFLECTIONS

SESSION ONE: LOSS & ENCOURAGEMENT

SAMPLE REFLECTION

Purpose of Session: Listen to how participants experienced loss. Show empathy.

Like a scene from a sci-fi movie, in March of 2020 the world watched the Coronavirus pandemic spread throughout the globe. Unlike watching a natural disaster unfolding on television in some remote location, the shadow of COVID-19 came to our local communities. It affected us personally. This is what made the pandemic seem surreal for most people; and traumatic for some.

Suddenly, we had to retreat from life as we knew it. Visiting relatives, frequenting restaurants, going to work and even attending church services were deemed to be dangerous. Indeed, the very things that once provided a sense of stability and happiness for us, were now a threat to our health. With this, we were asked to social-distance from one another and take refuge in our homes. Not only did we experience loss, but the predictable patterns of life were no longer a guarantee. At the very least, this experience tested our relationships, our attachments and our ability to adapt to new circumstances.

If there is any encouragement in all of this, it might be that the things we didn't rely on enough before COVID were the very things we should rely on more – such as talking to family members and creating shared experiences with them, spending time outside talking to neighbors, being present to others and showing empathy when they are having a bad day and, most important all, turning to God in our needs.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to make us reassess what really makes us happy. Yet, we can never forget about the pain and setbacks some people experienced during this pandemic. Now that we all suffered a little, we might be more inspired to accompany those who are struggling to move forward into the new normal.

SESSION TWO: NEW BEGINNINGS

SAMPLE REFLECTION

Purpose of Session: Discussing how lockdown and mitigation during pandemic brought about positive change.

During the Covid-Lockdown of 2020, families, schools, churches and businesses all took a hit. Parents had to juggle full-time work and full-time daycare for the children. Schools and churches closed. And while some business saw their profit margins decrease, other businesses were forced to shut down all together. Amid these misfortunes, it can be hard for some to believe in a good and loving God. Yet, as with all misfortunes, trying circumstances can inspire the very best in people. The pandemic was no exception.

Arguably, one of the most welcomed changes during the pandemic was the uptick in outdoor activity in neighborhoods. People taking walks outside, neighbors visiting neighbors, and families sitting on their porches are just a few examples. During the Covid lockdown, neighbors not only connected with one another more often, but they did random acts of kindness. In her blog, "Nextdoor", Shannon Toliver writes how social distancing led to the cancelation of a six-year old's birthday party. For an adult, this would amount to a minor inconvenience; but for a child, this change of plans could be devastating!

At any rate, this little boy's neighbors turned an unfortunate situation into somethings special. Shannon explains:

"When 6-year-old Miles from Mogadore, Ohio had to cancel his mad scientist themed birthday party, his parents posted on Nextdoor [blog] to see if any neighbors would be willing to drive by and honk their horn to wish Miles a happy birthday while keeping a healthy social distance. To their surprise, more than 40 neighbors stopped by to drop off balloons, candy, decorations, and presents resulting in a parade that Miles claimed was 'way better than a birthday party!' Miles's mom shares that her family felt so loved and grateful to be surrounded by wonderful neighbors and hopes that one day they can pay it forward to another family."

For Miles and his parents, these acts of kindness turned his neighborhood from a community of strangers into a community of friends. Yet, this story is not that unusual. For instance, high school graduates also experienced the bitter disappointment of having their graduation ceremonies canceled in the spring of 2020. For many high school seniors, this was a celebration that they eagerly anticipated for several months. Yet, the high school principal and faculty of one Catholic high school in Wisconsin found a way to celebrate the achievements of 130 seniors. The principal, accompanied by several teachers in a caravan of vehicles, drove to the residence of each high school senior. With great fanfare, their achievements were celebrated after all.

To repeat, during times of crisis it can be difficult to believe in a good and loving God. But when people step up and meet human needs, showing acts of kindness and love, it is easier to believe in such a God. After all, when God allows bad things to happen, good people often become better!

SESSION THREE: ACCOMPANIED BY OTHERS

SAMPLE REFLECTION

Purpose of Session: Feeling helped and equipped with each new threshold or challenge of life.

Today, many young adults have therapists because they do not have mentors. As human beings, we are wired to express outwardly what we are thinking and feeling inwardly; to talk about our dreams and joys in life on one hand, and our fears and sufferings on the other. To be sure, shared experiences with family members and trusted confidants help us to process life experiences; especially crises like the 2020 Covid pandemic.

Yet, busy schedules and broken relationships can diminish opportunities when people can safely talk about the ups and downs of life. These opportunities where we can be vulnerable and admit we do not have all the answers, are sometimes referred to as “safe places.” In the absence of safe places, anxiety increases. In fact, Barnes and Noble books store reported that between 2017 to 2018 book sales on anxiety had increased by 30 percent. Upon this finding, the president of Barnes and Noble publicly admitted that we now live in an anxious nation.

Perhaps, one underlying causes of this anxiety is that while we relied on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat to connect us with more people, but we relied less on those safe places in which we can be our weak and imperfect selves. Mind you, such places only work if family members, friends, and other companions make themselves available.

Even celebrities need to be accompanied in life by loved ones and confidants. Such relationships are necessary; but if they are in short supply, celebrities have the option of paying for a relationship with a therapist.

*Speaking of celebrities, Paul Stanley, lead singer of the rock group, Kiss, was interviewed recently in the television program called, “The Big Interview with Dan Rather”. To his credit, he humbly admitted that he had been seeing a counselor since his teenage years. He said, “I had what’s called a **microtia, which is basically not having an ear** ... I wasn’t very socially adept, and when you have **something physical** that sets you apart from people, it makes you the target of unrelenting scrutiny and sometimes ridicule.”*

*What made this scrutiny and ridicule almost unbearable was that his parents were unavailable when he was a kid. He had no one to offset all the negative talk from his peers; and no one to catch him when he fell. Paul Stanley went on to tell Dan Rather that, as an adolescent, he enjoyed unlimited freedom; but the freedom came at a cost. This young, aspiring musician did not benefit from the security of having protective boundaries. “At any point”, he said, “I knew that something could go terribly wrong.” For Paul, at least at the time, the answer to this insecurity was the pursuit of music, fame, and fortune. Yet, when his pursuits and aspirations were finally realized, he discovered that fame and fortune were, in fact, not the answer. ...**(continued on next page)***

SESSION THREE: ACCOMPANIED BY OTHERS

SAMPLE REFLECTION (cont.)

Purpose of Session: Feeling helped and equipped with each new threshold or challenge of life.

What was the answer? After years of enjoying fame and fortune, he came to understand that what he could not rely on in his childhood he could rely on in his adulthood, namely, his family. Indeed, his wife Pamela Bowen and his four children were the support he had always wanted. More than anyone else, they were there the ones to lift them up after he would fall.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, it says, "Two are better than one: they get a good wage for their labor. If the one falls, the other will lift up his companion." (4:9-10) An increasing number of young adults, even celebrities, know how it feels to fall. But the truth is that families and church communities are in the best position to lift them up again. And they still can be. After all, it was too long ago that families and churches were the bedrock of society precisely because they were safe places; venues where people received the assurance that "everything was going to be okay".

SESSION FOUR: ACCOMPANIED BY JESUS

SAMPLE REFLECTION

Purpose of Session: Explore ways how faith in Jesus can be relevant in your life going forward.

There are common awakenings that lead people back to God. Quite often, suffering causes people to reassess their values and priorities in life. Perhaps, this is why God allows bad things to happen. After all, suffering has a way of stirring our curiosity; causing us to ask the big questions in life we simply didn't have time for during times of peace and prosperity. Questions like, "Is there more to life than this?" or "Do I have to do life alone?" or "If there is a God, does he really love me?" are most relevant when we are deprived of the comforts of life or when the predictable patterns of life are no longer a guarantee.

For Heidi Craig, it was her brush with death during the delivery of her third child when these questions were answered for her. Featured in a YouTube documentary series, Heidi explained that after having flatlined for several minutes during complications to expel the placenta, she encountered God for the first time. For what seemed like eternity, she found herself in heaven, a place she called "home". As this young mother of three young boys was bathed in a light of utter peace and contentment, Heidi recalled having received three messages by God: 1 You are unconditionally loved 2. Everything is as it is supposed to be 3. Everything will be alright. Incidentally, it was only years after Heidi recovered from this experience that she worked up the courage to share her story.

If anyone had reason to doubt that she was unconditionally loved by God, it is Heidi Craig. After all, Heidi came from a broken and abusive family. Having never known stability or what real love was as a child, she married into an equally unstable marriage. It was only through her brush with death that she encountered God's unconditional love. It was then that she realized God had always been with her, accompanying her every step of the way. Moreover, Heidi learned that there was purpose behind what seemed like senseless suffering; that the hurt inflicted on her by others would not have the last word.

Like Heidi, a young man named Jeremiah had his trials. Jeremiah was a prophet in the bible who encountered God in a profound way. God had a mission to carry out. But Jeremiah ran into all sorts of opposition. Beaten down and discouraged, he cried out, "Cursed be the day on which I was born!" But God said to him, "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me." Having received and pondered this word of encouragement by God, this young prophet was able to see the troubles of life through a new lens.

Perhaps, the recent pandemic has inspired you to reevaluate your relationship with Jesus. You might be asking yourself if God really does have a plan for your life; and given the circumstances in your life, if there is any rhyme or reason to it. Can you believe what he reportedly told Heidi, that you are unconditionally loved, that everything is as it is supposed to be and that everything will be alright? If truth be told, sometimes it takes a crisis to even consider how important these big questions are.