

Welcome to Prayer Pod Small Groups at First Christian Church!

“Prayer Pods,” were originally organized as “Prayer Triads” in 2007. Groups of three met weekly for prayer and discernment organized around a book which everyone read. If you are new to First Christian, these groups are an important way to build fellowship as well as further your spiritual goals. Some may remember the original triads and how their discussions were integral in determining the mission and the “future story” of FCC. Many have participated faithfully through the years as the name changed and we have read many excellent books, made friends, and furthered the church mission.

This packet can help answer some frequently asked questions and will help you get your small group off to a good start!

Let’s Get Started!

Today you received the names and contact information of the people in your prayer pod.

You have been placed in a small group with other individuals who expressed a similar “meeting style” preference. One of the ways the church is learning to be community is to openly share expectations and concerns about gathering before we get together and during the first meeting.

You have expressed your meeting style preference (virtual or in person, or both) when you signed up and the Spiritual Formation Team has made every effort to place you with others who share your meeting preference at this time. But as this is an ever evolving part of our lives, please do check in with each other.

1. Please start an email with your small group this week.

There isn’t a group leader -- at least not yet - so to get the ball rolling, someone will need to take the initiative and send a first email or phone call to the others in the group. We designated someone on the list with a “ * ” – you’re kindly asked to get the first communications going.

In this first email, introduce yourself and discuss the best day and time for a first meeting, as well as your preferred meeting style.

Will we meet over Zoom the first time?

Every time?

Will we gather in a park?

Will we have a Plan B for weather or health or safety concerns?

Allow each person to check in about their needs (both technological and physical/emotional health) that may require some adaptation in order to meet.

If your group decides to meet in person,

- please gather in any outdoor space or well ventilated indoor space
- bring masks just in case
- maintain a safe distance of 6'
- and wash your hands before and after your meeting.

These simple routines will provide the least risk possible for spreading the virus but will also maximize your spiritual connection to one another by meeting in person.

Offering a zoom possibility for those not feeling well may be a good option for keeping the group connected week to week.

If your group decides to meet virtually,

- **use the first email to choose a platform** ([Zoom.us](https://zoom.us), [Google Hangouts](https://hangouts.google.com), [Skype](https://skype.com), [FaceTime](https://facetime.apple.com), or [Facebook Video Chat by Messenger](https://messenger.com)) and if these also have audio only options too.
- Assign someone to be the host and to create the meeting and email to everyone in the group.
- The host should arrive 5 minutes early.
- All participants need to take the time to download the appropriate software to meet with greater ease on the first meeting day.

If you have any trouble setting up a zoom please contact Pastor April (april@heartofeugene.org) or Mary Robertson (maryr@heartofeugene.org)

Regardless of whether you meet over a virtual platform or in person, limit the time of your weekly gathering to 90 minutes.

2. Have The First Meeting

At the first meeting, take some time to get to know one another and review these general guidelines. These are presented only in an effort to encourage your conversation.

- Welcome everyone. People will be late online, just as your in-person group, so build in some buffer time to catch up in the beginning.
- Virtual groups can warm up by getting people to use the "Mute" and "Unmute" button.
- When you're ready to begin, ask an icebreaker question. Take turns. Let everyone have an opportunity to answer the question before sharing a second time.
- Reflect together on your various reading styles (are you a fast or slow reader?) and what you hope to gain by being in a prayer pod.
- Share prayer requests and be ready to pause on someone going through a tough season. Don't rush through this time together online.
- End the video meeting with prayer.
- Be sure to set a reading goal and a next meeting date and location. At this next meeting you'll need to set aside time to read the suggested group guidelines/ground rules or create a set of shared expectations of your own.

Some Suggested Icebreaker Questions for the 1st meeting:

Start by introducing yourself. Share a little bit about your current passions and things that keep you busy in life. Or share the ways in which you are connected to the church.

Have you been in a pod before? What positive impact did it have?

Why did you first decide to join a pod?

Do you have any hopes or expectation of our time as a small group?

Do you have any worries about participating?

Do you have any hopes, expectations, or concerns about this book ?

General Group Guidelines

1. Engage with the book at home, underline key passages that stick out to you, write notes in the margins, or maybe even journal your responses each week.
2. Begin and end each session with a devotion or prayer.
3. Be yourself! If you are having trouble sharing in the group, try simply acknowledging it and let that truth re-center the group so that your group covenant/guidelines can be reviewed and conflict can be addressed if necessary.
4. If your group shows up and it's clear that nobody did their "homework" (that happens sometimes!), you can read a paragraph, page, or whole chapter aloud and then use one or more of these questions to help participants engage. Come to group even when you think you're the only one behind...the purpose is to be together.
5. Take turns as facilitators and timekeepers. When you take turns leading, you help each other learn valuable group management skills and in the process reveal unique and hidden gifts in each participant.
6. It's important to establish some commonly shared ground rules and clarify expectations for your gatherings. These questions could help you:
 - a. When and for how long would you like your group to meet? Is there anyone else we would like to invite?
 - b. What ground rules would you like to establish to encourage personal sharing and build trust as a group? (If you need ideas, examples are provided below.)
 - c. What do you hope to get out of this small group? What spiritual gifts will you bring to the prayer pod?

d. What will be your reading assignment for our next meeting? How many chapters or sections or pages?

e. If problems come up in the group, how will we deal with them (e.g. missed meetings, conflicting personalities, desire to change groups)?

f. Do we want to make any commitments to confidentiality?

7. Enjoy the experience!

At the end of the summer, talk as a group about your desires to continue – would you like additional book suggestions? Would you like to invite others to join you?

Please provide the Spiritual Formation team with any feedback or helpful suggestions for next year. Don't hesitate to call Pastors April or Zane with any questions or pastoral concerns. Thank you!

Examples of Ground Rules/Clarified Expectations

Here are some guidelines that often help groups work together more smoothly:

1. Each person will have the chance to respond to a question and then others may ask questions about the person's comments.
2. Nobody should speak twice until everyone has had the chance to speak once. Or after you have spoken, ask others for their input before offering your input again.
3. Introduce disagreement with the words, 'I see that a little differently.'
4. Use softening statements - such as, "I could be wrong," or "That's how I see it, but others might see it differently" - to avoid needless offense.
5. All of these guidelines, of course, can be summed up very simply: Treat others as you would be treated. Love your neighbor as yourself.
6. It's OK for there to be a period of silence for us to reflect before answering. Silence is a good thing. Whenever you feel ready to answer, please speak up.
7. If one member is very talkative while others hold back, try privately asking the more talkative member to help you draw out the less talkative members next time. Say something like, "You are so comfortable speaking up, but some other participants are really shy. Could you help me to draw them out more so that we hear more from everyone next time?"
8. If a member makes comments that are offensive to others, it may be necessary to interrupt them. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we agreed to some guidelines or ground rules for our group that I need to re-clarify right now." Whenever possible, this can be handled privately between meetings or during a break.

Leonard Swidler has written some guidelines that may be useful for your group: (you can learn more here: <http://www.interfaithdialogueassociation.org>).

In constructive dialogue:

1. Our goal is to learn, change, and grow - not to change others. Our goal is to share with others and receive from them.
2. We must share with honesty and sincerity - and trust the honesty and sincerity of others.
3. We can't compare our best ideals with the worst failures of others any more than we would want them to compare their best ideals with our worst failures. We can only compare ideals with ideals and actual practice with actual practice.
4. We define ourselves through dialogue - and learn how others define themselves.
5. We must test our understandings ("Is this what you're saying?") and not make hasty assumptions.
6. We must not bring outside assumptions or prejudices to our dialogue.
7. We must treat one another as equals, or no meaningful dialogue can happen. Without trust, there can be no real dialogue.
8. Without a willingness to be self-critical, there can be no real dialogue.
9. Our goal is to be able to see our partner's beliefs "from the inside."

The mission statement of First Christian Church:

We believe in the love of God for all people. We gather as a worshipping community of faith to follow Jesus Christ. We delight together in what God is doing through us to bring: healing within brokenness, unity within diversity, joy within grief, and power within weakness.

The mission of First Christian Church is to strengthen the relationships we have with God, with one another, and with ourselves. Transforming Lives, Christianity, and the World.