

Incarnational Community FAQ Sheet

What is the difference between a small group and an incarnational community?

The best way to think of the difference is that a small group is a “first-decision” community and an IC is a “second-decision” community. Anyone who makes the first decision to believe in God can be a part of church or a small group, but an IC takes a second decision to be accountable and be more intentional to integrating (Community/Communion/Mission) with a group of people. Most small groups commit to the communion circle only. That is they commit to learning scripture and taking part in Christian fellowship. IC’s do that, but also commit to live a life as missionary team together for their unchurched friends. Essentially, small groups are “one-circle” communities and Incarnational Communities are “three-circle” communities.

What types of people should I invite to go on mission with me?

Based on the first question, you can now see that second-decision IC’s are not for everyone...at least at first. Eventually, you should hope that every Christian will become a second-decision person, but we find that many groups have trouble getting off the ground if you simply try to “fire-up” your existing small group. The key is that you have know your people. If you would be afraid to have non-churched friends come into your existing small group relationship, then you have to either confront the issues, or start from scratch with a new group of friends that you know will be committed to creating a place of belonging for sojourners. The types of people you want are: (hospitable, warm and winsome with sojourners, not freaked out by alcohol, swearing, or weird spiritual philosophies, loving, helpful) Introverts can be great because they are great listeners, but they also have to be relationally warm.

You definitely want to avoid: Overly spiritual people, Pharisaical bible thumpers, people that would rather teach than listen, people that have goofy Christian bumper stickers on their car! I think you know the type.

How many people should we start with? When do we multiply?

We recommend that you start with 3-7 people. Most communities will start to tap out at around 15-20 folks simply because that’s all that you can fit in a home or around tables at a local coffee shop. If you start with too many Christians, the weight of that will make sojourners uncomfortable so start with a small number to avoid the freak factor.

Unlike most small groups, we don’t recommend that you multiply based on getting to a certain number. Relationships and spiritual trust take a long time to form - usually, at least a year. Therefore, to just clinically multiply based on numbers fails to take the relational connections into account. We recommend that all groups look and pray to expand and multiply but that it should be based on a new “mission.” For instance, if one couple says, “I really feel it’s time for us to go on a new mission and form a new community for our friends that live across town.” That’s a great reason to split off.

An incarnational community can be between 3-40 people and can stay together as long as the home is large enough and if the people continue to feel great synergy together so don’t look to split unless a new mission is clear.

How important is proximity for IC's?

Obviously, the closer you live, the better it will be. Spontaneous life together is critical to the natural flow of a community so work hard to be as close as you can. However, every city and culture is different. People connect through their work associations, recreation, kids athletic teams, etc and often people are used to driving 30 minutes to link these relationships. So some IC's can function quite well, but we still feel that there's a 30-minute drive point. We would recommend you avoid trying hold people together if they have more than a 30-minute drive. Urban environments where people live in the same neighborhood work the best and suburban environments where people can get to each other within 5-10 minutes also works well.

What About Kids? (This is the most asked question)

As we think about parenting our little one's an integrating them, we've learned they can be a huge asset but also our biggest dilemma. On a philosophical note, we have to remember that our Christian faith is an eastern faith and most eastern cultures have learned much better than we "westerners" how to integrate children into the spiritual lives of adults. Old Testament and New Testament writings indicate that parents are to pass down the story and experience of the Christian faith to their children, not the children's ministry at one's local church. Here are some practical ways we've seen this work.

1. Have different IC's take turns babysitting each other kids.
2. Have older kids (teens) watch the younger one's while the big people have their discussion time.
3. Learn to integrate the kids during parties or "mission" times where you're out helping people together. This gives them memories of a much more holistic Christian life.
4. Let the little kids run the IC once every month or two. For example, one set of third graders created invites for other kids at the school to come by and watch Shreck on the side of the house using their parents projector and also made invites for the parents to come over for coffee and refreshments. 60 kids showed up and as many parents! Encourage your little ones in praying for their friends and finding ways to be on mission with you. Even let them lead!

How do I grow deep with God when sojourners (non-Christians) are hanging around all the time?

Here's a truism. Christians struggle with the same things non-Christians do and visa-versa. (How to parent, marriage issues, financial stress, fighting inner demons and vices, depression, dealing with in-laws, and everything related to developing our faith, spirituality, etc.) Once you settle this issue, you can simply dive into scripture and struggle with it and anyone can be in the room. Remember, the goal of our spiritual time together isn't to "teach each other" as much as it is learning to be transparent an honest with all of our struggles to line up our lives to the life of Jesus. If a sojourner has actually come to your spiritual times as a community, it means they want to know what a Christian believes and struggles with. So be yourself, and be a learner of scripture instead of a teacher of scripture and everyone should be able to go deep and also be appropriate with sojourners.

*Of course there will be times where your MP's (missional people) will be together without sojourners so use those times to go deep as well. But remember, going deep isn't about more bible

knowledge. Growing deep should be about our depth of experience and life after Jesus! If someone wants more intense bible teaching, simply suggest that they download sermons on their own. You don't have to try to be a seminary class!

What do we do when some of our missional people start to slack off on missional living?

Missional life is hard and people will have good months and bad months. Don't call out the sluggards unless you absolutely have to. Instead think of ways to inspire people toward a more consistent focus. Consider sending out weekly encouragement emails and use your weekly or bi-weekly rhythm to let people assess their own struggles or successes. Remember, this a lifestyle not a program so give grace and only in the event that someone clearly doesn't want to participate, should you call them out. We always say, 'raise the bar' on the front end while you're recruiting people, but lower it on the back end so you don't become a legalistic experience.

What kind of things do you do for "communion" circle?

To keep your community based in scripture while still allowing for an appropriate environment for sojourners, we suggest that you avoid curriculum-based material if possible. It takes too much time to prepare for and the questions are most often geared to Christians, thus some of the questions will be poorly postured for sojourners. Just stick with the Bible and take a short passage or contained idea like (chapter 2 of James, or a parable) and read it out loud several times and ask these five questions.

1. What did you like about what you read?
2. What didn't you like about what you read?
3. Was there anything confusing?
4. What did you learn about the nature of God?
5. Regardless of your level of faith in God today, if you were to adjust something in your life starting tomorrow, based on what you learned, what would that look like?

These questions allow everyone to go as deep as they like but also remove the freak factor for sojourners.

What about alcohol?

As with any issue of life, many things can be dangerous but God doesn't outlaw them. For instance, woman can be dangerous for men, men for women, money can be dangerous to people, and even food. But God doesn't forbid them. He just asks us to learn how to navigate them. Alcohol will probably be the main struggle your community will have to work through. Here are a few suggestions.

1. If the people you're on mission for are recovering alcoholics, we suggest you have a "dry community." That is, we would avoid having people bring alcohol to meetings, etc. If there are MP's or other sojourners who aren't struggling with this, then feel free to have a glass of wine on other times where it's not the whole group. This is the best way to love those who struggle.

2. Remember, alcohol is not unbiblical. If you were a missionary in Europe, Canada, and Australia or just about anywhere and you were invited by those in the culture to come over and they served wine, it would be inappropriate NOT to receive their invitation. It's increasingly the same here in the US, so like any other freedom, be careful, but don't make it more of an issue than any other freedom you've got to learn to be careful with.

How do you study scripture if everyone has weird or alternative beliefs?

By the time someone moves from the relational connection to the spiritual aspects, they will be ready to process the scriptures. You don't need to lighten anything up, but you do need to be careful, sensitive and dignified in how you process their questions, and concerns. As your group is walking through the scriptures, if a weird question comes up or they share beliefs that are not in line with that of the Christians, the best response is to listen, thank them for sharing their thoughts, and then say, "as we're trying to understand the Christian faith, it's challenging because it teaches this".....and then share the scriptural thoughts. As long as you don't come across offended or arrogant, you'll have a great dialogue. In the case of those who are against the Christian doctrine, they simply won't be there or they'll leave on the first night. If they keep coming, it means they want to be challenged so just do so as a learner and someone who is struggling through it as opposed to coming across like they're idiots for believing what they believe

If you have a focus on decentralizing Incarnational Communities, how do you guard against false teaching?

You can't guard against wacky spiritual views. It's impossible. But you have to remember that the Holy Spirit was able to help the early faith communities navigate all the myriad of spiritual viewpoints by those inside the church and outside. They didn't have the bible as you and I do today, they didn't have commentaries, seminaries, or on-call theologians. They did the best they could and stayed strong to core and central issues of doctrine like "sin/need for an atoning savior/Jesus as the only way/and His resurrection. Beyond that, they had to trust God, and their communities were the way they stayed true. This is why we suggest you keep the scriptures as you main source of information. By just reading it, most inconsistencies will work their out naturally.

What are some ideas for the "Mission" circle?

Most people strike out too far and too fast in this circle. They try to move an entire small group downtown to help the homeless, or give food away at a food shelter. These can be good, but they tend to be unrealistic and don't sustain over time. Teach people that their "mission" each month should be helping practical needs of our friends. Whenever you get together ask, "Has God presented any need to you through the relationships you currently have?" If not, then surely you can pick a more generic way to bless the down and out, but we find that people become more organic and intuitive if your first line of offence is to meet the needs in your present spheres of relationships. For instance if you find out a friend lost their job, or got sick, then that becomes your mission for the month.

How should we handle collecting and blessing people with financial help?

In Adullam, we encourage people to continue to grow in their understanding and commitment to living by the Tithes as a basic framework for trusting God with their money, but we allow them freedom to give through their communities to practical needs or to the main church gathering. We find that people enjoy both and realize that it's a blast to bless people spontaneously as needs come up, but it's also deeply meaningful to give to a larger vision and support the gathered community. Again, if you're IC is working alongside a local church connection, we believe you will benefit the most and be a blessing to more people if you support both types of giving, both spontaneous and congregational. If you're not associated with a local church, then simply keep a can in the room and challenge each other to give privately and together as a group.

How do you decide who leads a community? How do we work as a team?

Leadership tends to show itself naturally and in most cases, whoever starts the group will be considered the main facilitator. However, many groups get started with a handful of friends. In that case, don't designate a leader per se, but instead talk through gifting and roles that will be needed in order to function together. You'll always need these functions:

***Communication Person:** Someone who will keep the online and phone communication going through emails, web support, etc.

***Pastor/Teacher:** Someone who naturally has the spiritual mojo to lead discussion, share devotions and care for spiritual needs that come up. Often, many people can share this role so don't lock it in, but designate someone who will keep a pulse and make sure that spiritual growth is happening.

***Hospitality Co-coordinator:** This person is generally the one whose house is the warmest. This person is about food, ambiance, and helps create a place of social belonging for the group.

***Social Co-coordinator:** This person tends to keep the group moving and always has an ear for social connections, service and blessing opportunities, etc.

The key for any group is not to designate titles or roles, but to ask people where they feel a natural affinity to serve. You can certainly shift all these functions and the group can carry them out together, but we do find that groups morph toward the gifting of its people so be flex and hold things loosely.

What's the best way to confront major lifestyle issues? Both Saint and Sojourners.

The scriptures teach Christians to hold each other accountable to lifestyle and sin issues, but not to hold sojourners accountable. This is a bit tricky but can be natural if sojourners start to integrate in. They will hear the Christians processing issues of holiness and lifestyle issues and hopefully begin to take their cues from the group. Once they begin to follow Jesus their behavior issues will change naturally as the group interacts. If someone however, is clearly sinning it affects the whole community so authenticity requires that you confront in love and hope it changes. In the case that someone wants to continue in the group but won't submit to basic and healthy scriptural advice and wisdom, then you'll have to ask them to leave and you must explain that the witness of the true gospel is compromised with them in an unrepentant condition. This should be a last resort so don't

consider every transgression a reason to boot someone out. Most of life is about becoming a disciple and people respond very well when confronted in love.

What aspects of Incarnational Community seem to need the most coaching?

We find that every community is natural at one circle and need a little prodding in to. Some people love to serve people but may need coaching in how to relate with culture and some can party their heads off, but struggle to figure how to develop a spiritual growth rhythm for the community. One way to develop a more fully functioning community is to start the group with people that are great with sojourners, hospitality, some who love to serve practical needs, and people who love to lead discussions around scripture and who have a more pastoral shepherding presence.

What are some successful rhythms you have seen communities have?

We've found every conceivable monthly rhythm will work. If you have a weekly church gathering then we suggest that you meet as an incarnational community in some fashion every week or two. If you meet less than twice a month, you will lose relational and spiritual momentum. If you're in a more house church or organic congregational form or are starting a new faith community without any tie to a local church, then we'd suggest you interact with each other weekly. Suburban folk with the minivan full of soccer and nightly school activities will probably be fine to meet twice a month, and singles or young couples without kids can easily do weekly even if they also have a church gathering to go to.

What about teenagers in incarnational community?

We find that middle school and high school students thrive incarnational community. They love to be a part of an adult community to do service projects, helping ministry and also love a good party. Reality is, however, that most don't necessarily want to be with their parents for communion or bible study type of activities. Here are a few options.

1. Encourage your teens to be a part of a Young Life or Youth For Christ program in your area. These ministries naturally integrate all three circles and you may find that by releasing them to this type of ministry, they will come alive.
2. If you're in an existing youth group context, consider encouraging them to take leadership in forming an incarnational community. The primer actually fits their lifestyle and it's formatted to make sense for them. Some youth groups actually have moved their program-oriented youth ministry to a incarnational community focus and have adult mentors lead the communities.
3. We also find that if the teens love being with their parents, even for spiritual study you can easily integrate and even form communities around the needs and desires of teens.

**Addendum for teens.* As with any community, we all have to learn how to interact with non-Christians. Some teens are too weak and may fall to the temptations associated with deep integration with unchurched teens, but many teens have strong values and can dive deep into the culture of their friends. For example, one group of teens took the incarnational call very seriously and asked their parents if they could be at all the parties they hear are going on so that they could make sure their friends don't drink and drive or get too out of hand. They committed to go as a servant team

together in groups of at least 3-8 students and they eventually became known as the kids that were keeping an eye on the others. Parents and even other teens started to call to ask if this servant team was going to be at the party and they were responsible to drive the kids home, call parents if they needed help, and actually became highly valued and respected by even the “party-kids.” This is what we should all be shooting for our children. Part of our role is to protect them, and the other part is to prepare them to live a life influencing culture instead of being influenced. Have this talk and ask them to decide where they feel they are at.

How do I navigate moving my friends from our Incarnational Community to the larger Church community?

If your gathered community or “church service” is appropriate you’ll have no problem inviting people to get to know the larger church community. Just let it happen naturally. But if you’re concerned that your sojourning friends would be freaked out or turned off by the corporate atmosphere, you’re wise to keep separation. You may need to bring up concerns with your pastoral staff so they can address issues that keep the integration from happening. Sadly, if the larger congregation simply won’t work, you’re going to have to make hard decision because you’re called to mission to the world and that must take precedence over “getting people to church.”