

Assembly Small Groups

Small groups are an important part of Assembly's DNA. This congregation started in 1974 as "*the assembly of small groups*." Today they are a primary place where we share about our lives, discern congregational matters, grow spirituality, and discuss topics of interest. Additionally, small groups serve as "the front line of pastoral care" and they facilitate congregational life and worship in a variety of ways. Most Assembly members and a majority of participants belong to one of our 20+ small groups. Each group establishes its own format, rhythm, and rituals. Groups tend to meet 2-4 times a month, 1½-2 hours per meeting. A few groups have children present; many make it a time for adults.

I. The theology of small groups

Small groups function as a more intimate setting in which we are church to one another. To be church to one another is to build a community centered on Christ, and committed to hospitality and tearing down walls that divide (Ephesians 2:14-15). As a result, Christian community – whether as a worshipping body or in small groups – brings together people who wouldn't otherwise be together. This is one distinction between the church and various clubs and organizations which create insiders and outsiders.

II. How to join a small group

At Assembly, pastors don't assign people to small groups, but they are happy to advise and assist people. Simply let the pastor of small groups know of your interest and you'll be shepherd through the process. Some people like to visit a number of groups before joining one; others prefer a quicker route. Sometimes 2-4 persons band together to form a new group and invite others to join. All of these are ways into a group. Joining a group can happen anytime of the year, but the best time is in the fall during the annual **Small Group Shuffle**. This is when new small groups form, and many continuing groups make space for new people.

III. The Shuffle: what it is, why we do it, and why sometimes we don't

At Assembly, we encourage people to occasionally shuffle (change groups) even when their group has been an enjoyable and nurturing place. Changing small groups periodically is how we maintain a healthy small group system. Specifically, we encourage people to change groups from time to time because:

- a) It helps Assembly be hospitable to newcomers by making space for them in existing small groups;
- b) It helps us build relationships across a wider cross-section of the congregation; and
- c) It's our best defense against ruts, cliques, and inhospitality in the congregation. We try to guard against the formation of little clubs. If a small group turns into a long-term gathering of select friends, then it has lost an important part of its mission of being church.

However, there are also good reasons for a group *not* to shuffle in a given year. The most common are:

- a) A group is relatively new (3 years or less). It takes time to build the kind of intimacy that allows for vulnerability and mutual support.
- b) The group currently has space to add new people.
- c) There are particular circumstances, perhaps a significant pastoral care issue, that make continuity important right now.
- d) The group is a safe haven for some who wouldn't otherwise be connected to the congregation (hopefully, this is not a permanent condition, and it wouldn't necessarily prevent a few group members from shuffling).

IV. The Shuffle: how it works

The Shuffle generally consists of two parts:

- 1) The first part is information gathering: finding out who wants to shuffle and how much space there is in existing groups to add people. This often begins mid-August and goes for about 4 weeks. Groups with room to add are asked to name how many available spaces they have, and whether they have any criteria for new members (e.g. sometimes groups have a focus (i.e. gratitude) they want new members to have interest in; sometimes groups want more children or less children in their group; etc.).

There are a variety of ways existing groups can enter the Shuffle:

- A group dissolves, and the former members join other groups or form new ones.
 - A few people from an existing group shuffle, making space for new people to join the existing group.
 - An existing group divides into two smaller groups, each of which can invite new members.
 - A group or part of a group can express willingness to shuffle if adding more people to the pool would be helpful to the larger system, but stay together if that's not needed in a given year.
- 2) Once the requisite information is gathered, people looking for a group are provided with a list of all the options, and small groups are provided with a list of who is looking. Then, small groups can issue invitations, and those looking can find a group they're interested in and join it. No try-out or interview needed. As always, anyone who wants assistance finding a group can obtain that from the pastor.

V. Small Group Life: Getting Started

Below are questions new small groups are encouraged to discuss. They may also be helpful for existing groups who want to evaluate the life of their group. Some questions are best addressed at the first or second meeting of a new group; others may be raised a little later. It's important that all members have input into forming and tending the life of a small group. It's also helpful to remember that whenever two or three are gathered, grace and compromise are often needed.

- a. **Meeting time.** What day and time works best for us? How long shall we meet? Do we want a firm ending time?
- b. **Meeting place.** Where shall we gather? Does one place work best or should we rotate our meeting place? What expectations come with hosting the meeting?
- c. **Size.** How many people would we like in our group? If we're open to inviting more, are there any particular parameters we're looking for? (Students? Families? Tenors? ...)
- d. **Small Group Covenant.** Some groups often find it useful to come to a common understanding on matters that make small group safe, supportive, and nurturing for all. It can be helpful to document or otherwise put in writing your agreement on the following matters so that there is sufficient clarity.
 - **Confidentiality.** What understandings about confidentiality would make small group a safe place to share personal information?
 - **Group commitment.** What are our commitments to attending group gatherings? Are there differences in commitment or availability that make consistent group life difficult for some?
 - **Being heard.** How shall we make sure that everybody has a chance to be heard, and that a few don't dominate group time?
 - **Designating roles.** Do we want to designate certain roles in the group; e.g. someone as the group's facilitator? Time-watcher? Organizer? Other roles?
 - **Evaluating group life.** How often should we evaluate group life; where everyone can identify what they most appreciate about small group, and what aspects of group life need attention? (See *Small Group Check-up Questions*).
- e. **Agenda.** How shall we structure our time together? How can we learn to know each other? (New groups sometimes begin by having people share a portion of their life story). Do we have a mission or focus we'd like to pursue? (Resource: the pastor of small group has a list of discussion questions and activities small groups have engaged in the past).
- f. **Rituals.** What rituals would we like to establish? Praying? Eating together? A devotion? Something else?
- g. **Rep.** Who can represent us at the monthly small group reps meeting? Reps usually meet the 4th Tuesday of the month, except in June, July, and December. (See Rep's job description)
- h. **Name.** What name best fits our group?
- i. **Children.** Do we want to incorporate children into our group? If so, how? Do we want those who may need to pay for child care?

- j. **Avoiding common pitfalls.** Often times it is helpful to name the most common pitfalls of group life, and discuss how your group will try to work with them before or if they become a problem. They include:
- divergent levels of attendance/commitment by people in a group;
 - groups that meet infrequently or haphazardly;
 - no one empowered to take leadership (includes planning, organizing, facilitating);
 - individuals who regularly dominate group time;
 - agenda which isn't compelling (or the group doesn't stick with the agenda it planned).

VI. Small Group Health Check-Up Questions

For periodic discussion

1. What have you (or do you) most appreciated about small group gatherings?
2. What aspects of group life could use some attention or refocus?
3. What agenda, discussion topics, or activities would you recommend for the coming year?
4. What are ways small group can support your spiritual growth or emotional life? Are there issues in which support from a pastor would be helpful?
5. How are various roles being filled in your group? Some roles are formal (e.g. small group rep) and others may be unspoken (group facilitator, organizer, nurturer, host, ...). Are there ways these roles could be carried out more effectively in your group?

VII. Roles and responsibilities of Assembly small groups

CARE

Small groups are an important place of nurture and mutual care. Some ways groups do this is by:

- providing care/support with **births, deaths, and illnesses** (e.g. bringing a red rose for the altar on the Sunday following a birth; hosting a baby shower, organizing carry-in meals; etc.);
- marking **transitions** and maintaining contact when members are on extended leave (e.g. sending care-packages, notifying pastoral team of transitions, organizing send-offs or blessings, , etc.);
- bringing **financial need requests** to those who can access congregational resources (best to start by notifying a pastor).

Although small groups are the front-line of care, they should not hesitate to alert the pastoral team when help and resources are needed beyond what's available in the small group.

GIFT DISCERNMENT

Gift discernment is part of our community life and often happens within the small group context. Gift discernment includes participation in the annual **congregational leader selection** process.

DOING MISSION

Small groups are part of our mission of hospitality and sharing God's love with others. We engage this in part by inviting new people into small groups. Also, small groups sometimes identify a mission for their group (e.g. advocating for immigrants, practicing gratitude) or they actively support members in their personal/vocational missions.

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Small groups give attention not only to concerns of their own members, but also to the health and liveliness of the congregation. To further the mission and life of the congregation, small groups are encouraged to **discuss congregational issues** brought to them and pass on information from members' meetings to those in the group who may have missed a meeting. Small groups can also **impact the congregational agenda** through various means. For example, small groups can:

- * impact the worship diet by suggesting themes and ideas to the worship committee (and by offering to plan worship during the seasons of small group worship leading);
- * discuss and develop ideas or questions that are raised in worship, extending discernment begun in worship into the life of small groups;
- * suggest and plan electives in order for an idea or theme to be explored more deeply;

- * initiate congregational discernment by proposing a matter for discussion to the leadership group.

RECOVENANTING

In preparation for the annual reaffirmation of the membership, all members are expected to review their commitment to the Covenant and Practices in their small group. Small group representatives should let a pastor know if there are any in their group open to covenanting or any members who are stepping back from membership in the congregation.

PERIODIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Small groups also take on the following occasional tasks:

- Greeting people Sunday morning (2-3x/yr).
- Worship planning (< once a year).
- Participate in cleaning after a fellowship meal or of a section of the meetinghouse.

VIII. Job Description of a Small Group Rep.

Small Group reps represent their group at the monthly, and their job is to:

- i) **foster small group life at AMC** by:
 - (1) monitoring the health of the group and sharing with other reps what is or isn't working;
 - (2) helping detect who at AMC is new and unconnected, and inviting that person(s) -- when appropriate -- to visit the group.
- ii) **be a link between the reps' small group and the congregation** by:
 - (1) regularly attending and participating in the Reps meeting;
 - (2) providing and explaining information about congregational life to their group, soliciting responses; and conveying those responses to the appropriate pastor or committee chair in a timely manner.

It is **not** assumed that the Rep will:

- i) be the group's leader,
- ii) be responsible for the group's health,
- iii) serve as Rep forever (a minimum two-year commitment is helpful for continuity at Reps' meetings).

IX. Suggestions for what to do when leaving or ending a small group

- a) Don't under-estimate how hard changing/leaving groups can be. There are many good reasons to do so, but that doesn't make it easy.
- b) Share with the group what has been life-giving for you in the group
- c) Say "thank you" for the people and the things you have appreciated
- d) Be straight and clear about reasons for leaving
- e) Acknowledge that saying "good bye" always involves loss
- f) Your group might want to utilize a ritual of some sort to mark the ending.

X. Membership at Assembly (also known as covenanting)

A process which usually starts in small groups

We invite everyone who affirms the Assembly [covenant and practices](#) to publicly and formally join Assembly. Those who choose to be members are invited to re-affirm their membership annually on Pentecost during our Recovenanting ritual.

Why become a member?

- To become a member (or *covenant* with the congregation, as we often call it) is to say that I am no longer a visitor or occasional participant here; it is a public statement that my faith journey is happening in this place, with these people;
- Covenanting publicly to a group is a tangible step of being known – an important element of a healthy community. Also, when one publicly joins a congregation and affirms its vision, it is a joyful and encouraging event for the entire community;
- Anabaptists have traditionally believed that committing to a faith community isn't a privatized decision. In this age of individualism and shallow connections, we see covenanting as a way to live counter-culturally by taking seriously and being intentional about our commitments.

What is the practical meaning of membership at Assembly?

The meaning of membership is largely symbolic and intangible (there are no tax benefits or discounts at the Brew). Most of Assembly's communal life is open to all who find their involvement meaningful, however there are a few areas of congregational life reserved for members. These include making decisions at congregational meetings and serving on elders and the leader selection committee.

Why do we recovenant?

Recovenanting is an annual opportunity to renew and celebrate our membership in the congregation. Most of us find that our commitment does not change significantly year to year, however we don't simply assume that is always the case. Recovenanting is a time to review our participation in and connection to the Assembly community.

How to become an Assembly Member

Joining Assembly generally involves the following steps:

1. **Join a small group**, and become known to your group members. Small groups are a primary component of how we do church at Assembly. A small group is a place to connect more deeply with others, learn about Assembly, and be a part of its life and practices.
2. **Meet with one of the pastors** (of your choosing) for a get-to-know-each-other conversation; to ask questions about Assembly, and to share some of the important aspects of your life and faith journey.
3. **Find a suitable date to publicly covenant** with the congregation by checking with your small group and the worship committee. Your small group should announce this in the AssemblyLine at least two weeks ahead of time so that the congregation can anticipate this joyful event (e.g. "Group X is happy to announce that [name] will be covenanting with the congregation on [date]").
4. The **Covenanting ceremony** usually includes the following:
 - a. an introduction by a member of your small group;
 - b. you briefly sharing (around 250 words) a part of your faith journey, and what brings you to this commitment [if this feels overly daunting, talk to a pastor about alternatives];
 - c. an affirmation that you have been received as a member of the congregation;
 - d. a congregational reading of the Assembly covenant; and
 - e. prayer.
5. Request a letter of **membership transfer** from your previous congregation (if applicable).