



Group Leader Training Guide

FOR USE BY THE OCIA LEADER TO TRAIN GROUP LEADERS

Note: This training is beneficial for all volunteers, not just designated group leaders. Attending allows every team member to understand the expectations of serving in OCIA and fosters a shared sense of mission. It also prepares volunteers to step in as substitutes if a group leader is ever unavailable for a session.

Key Concepts:

Leader: In this guide, the term “leader” refers to the OCIA coordinator or the primary person responsible for overseeing the entire OCIA process. This person guides the formation journey, ensures fidelity to Church teaching, and leads the main sessions.

Group Leader: Group leaders are volunteers who facilitate small group discussions and accompany participants throughout the process. Their focus is on building relationships, fostering conversation, and walking with individuals in discipleship. While the leader may also serve as a group leader at times, not all group leaders serve in the broader coordinating role referred to as “leader.”

Pastoral: This is not an expectation reserved solely for “pastors.” To be pastoral means to care for other souls in a loving and kind way. This does not mean veiling the truth of the Church’s teachings to spare feelings. It does mean meeting people where they are, speaking kindly and respectfully, and rooting truth in the love of Christ.

Evangelization: This is the loving act of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our words, our actions, and our lives so that others may come to know, love, and follow him. As the Church teaches, evangelization is the mission of every baptized person, calling us to witness to Christ in both ordinary and extraordinary ways.

“Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14)

Accompaniment: Accompaniment, for the purpose of OCIA, is the intentional act of walking with another person on his or her journey of faith, offering support, listening, encouragement, and witness. It means meeting people with compassion and patience to help them take the next step closer to Christ. True accompaniment is rooted in relationship and leads to conversion, always directed toward deeper communion with Jesus and his Church.

“Spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 170)

Training Agenda Overview (approx. 90 minutes)

- Fellowship and Thank You (15 min.)
- The Purpose and Process of OCIA (7 min.)
- The Role of the Group Leader (5 min.)
- Expectations for Group Leaders (10 min.)

- The Importance of Community (10 min.)
- Practical Tips for Leading a Small Group (35 min.)
- Q&A and Final Encouragement (5 min.)
- Closing Prayer (3 min.)

Fellowship and Thank You (15 min.)

Practice hospitality with your group leaders by opening with **snacks, beverages, and prayer**. After a time of fellowship, hand out any necessary papers like the year’s schedule, the list of members in their small group, and a write-up about their role and tips for facilitating a group, which they can reference throughout the year.

Next, begin with a warm, heartfelt welcome. Acknowledge the time, energy, and faithfulness each person is offering by being a group leader. Remind them that what they are doing is not just helping with a program but is participating in the work of evangelization and accompaniment.

Example: “Thank you for being here. Thank you for saying yes to something that may feel new, uncertain, or even a little intimidating. You are stepping into a role that can genuinely change lives. Just know that you don’t need to be a theology expert or polished to perfection to help bring people into the Church. What matters here is your presence and your faithful witness to the love of God and his Church. I appreciate your willingness to walk with others on their journeys. If you have any worries or questions throughout our training, or after, please don’t hesitate to speak with me.”

The Purpose and Process of OCIA (7 min.)

Explain that OCIA is not about simply passing on information through classes. It’s a process of conversion, community, and growth in relationship with Christ and his Church. This growth should shape how people choose to live their lives, but it will take time and accompaniment.

Key Points:

- OCIA is a process, not a conveyor belt with an identical finished product at the finish line. Each person is unique and may require additional or specialized attention.
- OCIA should bring people to a place of transformation, or at least a place of *desired* transformation. There is an emphasis on living out what is taught in their own lives. It’s about forming disciples.
- Faith is caught more than taught. People more often remember how you act than what you teach. This is why group leaders matter so much.

ADDITIONAL LEADER NOTES:

The Role of the Group Leader (5 min.)

As a group leader, you are more than just the person facilitating discussion. Your role is vital to building community and encouraging personal growth. You are irreplaceable.

What your role includes:

- Welcoming your group each week with genuine warmth
- Getting to know each person—learning their names, stories, joys and struggles, and their doubts and questions
- Encouraging trust and a sense of community in the small group
- Checking in about the “At Home” activities and helping keep participants engaged
- Facilitating discussion based on each lesson’s questions
- Modeling the Christian life through listening, joy, humility, and presence
- Share personal stories and examples *if necessary* to encourage more group sharing
- Communicate all necessary information or concerns with the OCIA leader

ADDITIONAL LEADER NOTES:

Expectations for Group Leaders (10 min.)

Set clear expectations of what it means to be a group leader. Affirm the calling of their role.

Expectations:

- Be present at every session (or find an appropriate and trained substitute if necessary).
- Be kind, patient, and nonjudgmental.
- Be faithful to the teachings of the Church, affirming the lessons’ content, in all discussions.
- Be a Catholic in good standing (attend Mass every Sunday, live according to the Church’s moral teachings, and actively practice the Faith in full communion with the Church).
- Listen well. Speak carefully and with humility.
- Do not try to have all the answers: bring questions back to the leader if needed.
- Respect confidentiality within the small group.
- Pray regularly for your group members.

ADDITIONAL LEADER NOTES:

The Importance of Community (10 min.)

Help your group leaders understand that belonging often comes before believing. To “belong” does not mean to “fit in.” To fit in removes one’s individuality and expects them to fit within a group dynamic or the leader’s expectations of what it means to be “ready,” “holy,” or “suitable.” However, group leaders should encourage *belonging*. This means the group leader, along with other members of the group, receives each person for who he or she is. This includes the person’s experiences, questions, stories, and individuality. In being received, people begin to feel as though they belong. Community paves the way for conversion.

Most people do not come to the Faith because of a brilliant argument or a well-phrased response. They come because someone loved them well. People stay in the Church not because of the content alone but because they feel seen, known, and loved. This is where you come in. When they feel loved by you, they experience the love of God more deeply.

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

How to grow community and encourage belonging:

- Learn everyone’s names and call them by their names.
- Start each discussion time with a light check-in to encourage sharing: “What was a high/low from your week?” or “Where did you see God at work in your life this week?”
- Encourage every person to respond to questions and thank them for their insights.
- Invite other members of the group to share their thoughts on another member’s response, allowing the group to “belong” within itself, not just with the group leader.
- Regularly ask for prayer intentions from members of your group. You can write them down to pray personally or take five minutes at the end of discussion to pray in the moment.
- If correction is needed, lovingly thank a member for sharing. Then provide additional insights, analogies, or testimonies that convey the necessary correction without making the person feel as though they said something wrong.
- Remember follow-ups: If you learn about a concern, struggle, prayer request, or life event happening with a member of your group, follow up on this the next week. This shows you were listening when they shared and that you care about what is going on.

*Tip: For this section of the Group Leader Training, consider role-playing a few of these tips for others to see how to implement them.

ADDITIONAL LEADER NOTES:

Practical Tips for Leading a Small Group (35 min)

Offer these tips as tools to help facilitate a successful small group dynamic and experience. Also encourage leaders to grow into their own style and adjust according to the needs of their group.

HERE ARE TIPS FOR HOW TO FACILITATE WELL:

Establish how you will begin your group each week and keep it consistent so that participants know what to expect and grow in comfort level. Example: prayer, experiences with the “At Home” activity from the previous week, holy moments (moments of goodness/grace), etc.)

Be silent more than you speak. This is perhaps the most important tip! As leaders, it is easy to fill the *awkward* silence with our own stories and responses. However, try to refrain from being the first to share! Embrace the silence. This allows time for members of your group to reflect on the question. Also, in embracing the silence, others may feel compelled (in the awkwardness) to begin sharing.

Understand your role as facilitator. While your role is vital to the group, the group discussion and sharing is not meant for you. It is meant for the participants and sponsors to establish community and share their experiences and questions. In your essential role, you act as a guide to *facilitate* discussion and keep topics on track. There may be times when it is appropriate to move the discussion in another direction. Allow this to happen occasionally to build trust and camaraderie. However, when it is necessary, gently move the conversation back to the topic and discussion. This can be done by simply restating or rephrasing the question. This also means you do not always have to share your stories or directly teach something. Occasionally, share personal insights to help your group relate to you and trust you; however, participants should be talking more than you do in the discussion.

Call on people when appropriate or necessary. There is nothing wrong with directly asking someone, “Do you have anything to share about this question?” The worst response is no, and that is okay! Respect a “no” response with kindness: “That’s okay. Maybe our next question will spark something,” or “Let us know if something comes to mind.” Regularly calling on someone to share, even indirectly and gently, establishes the expectation that everyone should respond. It may take several sessions for this to become the norm, but stick with it!

It’s okay to say, “I don’t know.” As a group leader, you do not need a theology degree. If someone asks a question that you are unsure how to answer, simply respond, “That’s a great question, but I’m not sure. Let me find out for you and let you know.” This is a great way to model that no one *must* have all the answers, but the Church *does* have the answers; we simply need to take the time to find them. You could also consider inviting the OCIA leader or the lesson’s catechist over to ask for the appropriate, theologically sound response. What should not happen is that a group leader feels compelled to know everything and, as a result, leads someone down the wrong path by sharing information contrary to the Church’s teaching.

Affirm every effort to share. Members of your group will feel safe and comfortable sharing if they receive a response. Responses could include things like, “Thank you for sharing that,” “That is a great insight,” “Wow, that must have been wonderful/difficult/inspiring.” A follow-up question could even be appropriate to show your care for what was shared: “Could you tell me more about that?” Someone’s response should *never* be met with silence. Even if the group leader does not intend it, silence could make someone feel unheard, uncared for, or irrelevant in the group. This would hinder trust and discourage future sharing.

Pray with and for your group. While the lessons include prayers at the start and end, a group leader should feel free to pray with group members whenever necessary or appropriate. This can be done by asking for prayer intentions. If a difficult situation or struggle arises during group sharing, a group leader may also pause the discussion and ask the members, “Could we offer a prayer for this member of our group?” regarding what was shared. Additionally, the group leader should personally pray for their group members (including sponsors) throughout the week. Perhaps offer a Rosary for the group or say a Hail Mary for each member.

Celebrate victories together. Whether big or small, celebrate victories. If members share personal details like a new job, a baby on the way, an engagement, a healed sickness, a received sacrament, or a particular grace, the group should rejoice together.

Perception shapes experience. Be mindful of how your words, questions, and even Church teachings are being received by the group—not just what was *intended*. A comment might be meant as lighthearted or sincere, but if someone hears it as judgmental or dismissive, that perception becomes their experience. For example, if a group member *feels* a comment was harsh, even if it wasn't meant that way, then it was harsh to them. That matters.

Pay attention to the group's reactions, such as body language, silence, or tone shifts. If something seems off, don't be afraid to circle back with gentleness: "I just want to make sure that came across the way I intended. If it didn't, I'm sorry. Let's talk about it."

The goal isn't to walk on eggshells, but to foster a safe and loving space where trust can grow.

Check in when something seems off. As a group leader, you're in a unique position to notice when something seems off. Maybe a participant is unusually quiet, withdrawn, or seems burdened. These moments matter. When appropriate, take the initiative to check in. This can be done informally during fellowship, on a break, or after the session. A simple statement like, "Hey, I noticed you seemed a little quiet today. I just wanted to check in. Is everything okay?" can go a long way.

If you follow up by email or text, please copy or inform the OCIA leader. They don't need to reply or intervene unless necessary, but this adds a layer of accountability and support for everyone involved.

HERE IS WHAT TO DO IN SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

When someone dominates the conversation: It is possible to have a member of the group who likes to share often, overshare, or get the group off track. Do not make this person feel unwelcome or embarrassed for sharing. However, if necessary, find an appropriate moment in their sharing to thank them and redirect. An example of this is, "Thank you for sharing that/I really appreciated it when you said XYZ ... **Name** (*another member of the group*), what are your thoughts on this question?" This affirms the "dominators" who have been sharing while also inviting others to the conversation.

When someone shares something inappropriate or concerning: The goal of the group setting is to encourage a level of comfort for people to share. This may lead to personal accounts, which is good and should be encouraged. However, there may be occasions where the personal aspects of someone's sharing are inappropriate, concerning, or potentially triggering for the rest of the group. If this happens, the group leader does *not* want to chastise or ostracize the person sharing. If the member is sharing these things, it is because they feel safe and have built trust. However, the group leader also needs to find a way to stop the inappropriate sharing and redirect. The following would be appropriate: "We appreciate what you have shared. That must have been difficult for you. I would love to talk more about that with you after our class today if you would be open to that." (*Allow them to say yes or no to this invitation and then redirect the conversation to another member of the group.*)

When someone challenges a Church teaching: The group leader can provide clarifying formation, examples, Scripture references, and Church references for the specific teaching. However, a small group does not need to be the place for debate. If the group's dynamic would be harmed by an argument, one of the following approaches would be appropriate:

- Encourage the member of the group to stay behind after class to continue the conversation. Say, “I would love to continue this conversation. If you’d like, you’re welcome to stay after tonight, and we can chat.”
- Share the member’s concerns with the OCIA leader. This way, the OCIA leader can return to this specific teaching at the start of the following session. This can be done in a general way through a brief review, testimony, Scriptural reading, etc. It should be done indirectly, *without* pointing back to the participant.
- The group leader could encourage discussion and debate among the group’s members. This would take the responsibility of correction off the group leader and turn it into a friendly conversation amongst the group. Be sure to facilitate this discussion so it remains friendly and avoid making the participant who is challenging the teaching feel alone or attacked. You could facilitate this with questions like, “Does anyone else struggle with this teaching?” or “Who would like to share what they find truthful/encouraging/freeing/ etc. about the Church’s teaching on this topic?”

ADDITIONAL LEADER NOTES:

Q&A and Final Encouragement (5 min.)

Allow for any questions. Then wrap up the training with encouragement. Reaffirm their role and thank them for responding to this ministry.

Example: “This may feel like a small thing to simply show up and lead a group, but God uses small things to do great things. Your willingness to be present, to listen, and to love the individuals in your group may be the reason someone becomes a saint.”

Consider sharing the account of Ananias from Scripture: Acts 9:10-19

Example: “Ananias had a very small and simple role in Scripture. All we know about him is that he courageously preached the Gospel to Saul, who became St. Paul. Many of us would not be here if it were not for the evangelistic work of St. Paul—which means we would not be here if not for the one simple act of Ananias, who healed and taught St. Paul, aiding him in his conversion. This is the impact that one moment as a group leader could have. God has chosen you, and I invite you to courageously allow him to use you to build up his Church.”

FINAL LEADER REMINDERS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Close with a short prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to fill the group leaders with love, courage, and wisdom. An example can be found below.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Come, Holy Spirit.

You are the source of love, courage, and wisdom.

Fill each of these leaders with your presence and strength.

Guide their words, steady their hearts, and lead them in truth.

Help them to listen well, speak with clarity, and serve with humility.

Grant them the grace to accompany others with patience and fidelity to Christ and his Church.

Bless the groups they will lead. May each conversation and gathering reflect your light and draw hearts closer to you.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen. +

Questions? Please contact us. We'd love to hear from you!

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