

# Starting Social Meetings in Your Context

By Shane Anderson

## Suggestions for the Process

1. Get leadership approval/buy in. If appropriate, encourage them to do key word searches in an Ellen G. White database, searching for “social meeting” and related terms; encourage them to listen to sermon series on the topic; etc.
2. When organizing your first Social Meeting, if possible, select members carefully. Choose people that are committed to their relationship with Christ, eager to grow personally in their faith, and interested in helping God’s church to grow spiritually and numerically. Some or all of these initial members may be able to start their own Social Meetings in the future.
3. Use the guidelines for other small-group-type meetings when appropriate, such as:
  - a. *Size*. A Social Meeting can be done with large groups—there is no limit! However, as the group size increases, fewer people tend to speak up. Consequently, 7-12 participants is generally ideal.
  - b. *Confidentiality*. Protect it (see sample opening reading below).
  - c. *Distractions*. Deal with distractions as soon as possible to lessen or eliminate them.
  - d. *Childcare*. Provide it in a nearby room, though children that are sufficiently mature can enjoy and participate in Social Meetings.
  - e. *Logistics*. Establish your meeting location, host, hostess, leader, assistant leader, etc.
  - f. Other general small group guidelines may also apply to the Social Meeting.
4. In general, Social Meetings have two possible topics on which participants can share:
  - a. How is it with Christ and me today?
  - b. My experience on a topic of the groups choosing.
    - Good Social Meetings STAY ON TOPIC! The leader needs to be diligent in re-directing the group when necessary. A spiritually uplifting Social Meeting can quickly become an entertaining, but spiritually irrelevant gathering if you are not careful.

5. The Social Meeting **requires** preparation during the week for all participants. The Spirit of Prophecy is clear on this. Participants should be thinking throughout the week:
  - a. What is it that I need to share for myself to grow in Christ?
  - b. What does God want me to say to help build up my fellow believers in Christ?
  - c. What do I need the members of my Social Meeting to hold me accountable for or to pray for me for?
6. Often new Social Meetings have great success right out of the box. People are excited, enthusiasm is high, and sharing is spontaneous and inspirational at first.
  - However, after a few weeks or months sharing can become dull unless all participants prepare for the meeting. Off-the-cuff works initially; but keeping Social Meetings healthy long-term requires intentional preparation.
7. If needed, consider a name other than Social Meeting (e.g., "Community Growth Group," "Groups of Belonging," or whatever is fitting), as the term "Social" may no longer be helpful in your particular context.
8. New Social Meetings should generally last 30 to 60 minutes, depending on group size. Ultimately, the maximum duration is up to the group to decide and should be followed, except when everyone agrees to deviate (for example, if the Spirit is moving powerfully and all members agree to continue sharing).
9. Prayer can be had at any time during the meeting. But if it doesn't occur until the end, set aside a solid 5-10 minutes for it, making certain that the prayer needs in the group are specifically addressed. This is particularly important if a pre-Adventist guest makes a prayer request. If they make such a request, be sure to pray for it, specifically, in the group, at that meeting! Consider also keeping a prayer journal to mark God's work in your group.
10. Avoid giving direct advice to another group member unless they specifically request it. It's okay to share your own relevant experiences if it will be helpful, but do so without being preachy or making them uncomfortable.
11. After some practice, open your Social Meeting to pre-Adventist guests. Social Meetings without guests are good. Social Meetings with guests tend to be completely awesome and should be held regularly. Social Meetings that never have guests tend to die like any other small group ministry in the Adventist Church. Social Meetings, rightly done with Christ-centered sincere testimonies, can be powerful witnesses to pre-Adventist guests! It also reminds Adventist members that their testimony matters, and that it can make an eternal difference in the life of someone who's spiritually seeking.

12. Make it repeatedly and abundantly clear to your Social Meeting leaders and Adventist participants the following guidelines for sharing in front of guests:
- a. When pre-Adventist guests are present, what you say *must be understandable* to them. If you use church or religious jargon, fine—just be sure to explain it.
  - b. Never talk down to a guest. Never.
  - c. Avoid talking directly to a guest. Talk instead to the whole group.
  - d. Avoid “going around the circle” to share. Instead, go randomly across the circle, so that the guest doesn’t feel awkward about being silent when it’s supposedly “their turn to share.”
  - e. Be real. Don’t fake a great week with Christ if you didn’t have one. If you’re able to, do speak honestly of your hope in Jesus even if your week was terrible.
  - f. Read the opening reading (see below) at each meeting when there’s a new guest, or at least once a month, just to keep everyone on the same page as to the meeting’s purpose.
  - g. Promptly address any situation where a group member drives off a guest. Discuss the behavior with the offender to encourage correction and with the offended to bring them back, if possible. Don’t let this kind of issue just slide.
  - h. No one should share for long periods in Social Meetings, except in unusual circumstances (e.g., death in their family, terminal illness diagnosis, etc.). Participants can and should share multiple times if time permits, but as a general rule, testimonies should be brief and focused.
    - An example: In a 30-minute social meeting with 10 people, each person gets only about 2-3 minutes to speak. If you need to reserve time for prayer, each person’s sharing time needs to be even shorter. Many Social Meetings thus find that a minimum of 45 minutes works better for facilitating inclusive discussions.
  - i. If there is a member of a Social Meeting that persistently talks too much, leadership **MUST** address the problem directly with that person **OR THAT PERSON WILL KILL THE MEETING**. If one person consistently dominates the conversation, others may stop attending. Be kind and clear with the individual: encourage them to keep their comments brief to ensure everyone can participate.
13. Social Meeting leaders (or anyone deemed qualified to do so) should follow up with any spiritual decisions they sense that a pre-Adventist guest is wanting to make. This can be done during a meeting but may need to wait until a more private time can be found.
14. Above all, let God lead! On many, many occasions, I have seen the Spirit work in Social Meetings in guests and members alike and have been amazed at where the discussion goes and the power of God’s transformational love. Give God the reins and see where He takes you.

## Welcome to our Social Meeting!

We are here for at least four reasons:

First, *to know Jesus better and become more like Him.*

We do this through sharing with the group our current experience with Jesus, and through hearing others share about their current experience with Him.

Second, *to know each other better and taste genuine Christian community.*

We do this through mutual sharing, support, prayer, and praise.

Third, *to learn to talk about Jesus.*

Sometimes, our shyness and fears make it hard to talk about Jesus with others. By practicing here, we'll become better at sharing Him with others during the week.

Fourth, *to be a safe place to learn about Jesus.*

This is a place where all who want to know more about Jesus may come, listen, ask questions and participate in our discussions to learn about Him.

We're glad that you're here! And to make the best use of our time, we ask that each of us remember some simple guidelines throughout our meeting:

1. If you're a guest with us today, please ask questions and join our discussions! But we also respect your right to silence, and after introducing yourself, you don't have to say another word if you don't want to.
2. If you're already a Christian, share honestly from your heart where you're at with Jesus. Let's celebrate together what God is doing for you! And please, share your challenges, too. We're all growing, and we are not here to try to impress others.
3. Share briefly. Long speeches are death to our meetings, and each of us needs time to share.
4. Please do share your personal experience! But avoid giving advice to another group member, unless he or she specifically requests it.
5. Lastly, confess no one's sins but your own—and even some of those you may want to save for more private conversations, either with someone you trust or just God Himself. Use discretion.

**Most of all, let's remember that we are here to learn of and from Jesus Christ.** May our words be understandable to each person present; may we deepen our friendships with one another; and may we leave this place firmly convinced that Jesus is alive and available to each of us, even now.