

Starting A Group

It may sound obvious, but if you are longing for community, the best way to find it is to create it! Forming a group is not nearly as intimidating as it seems. The hardest part is summoning the courage to share your story.

Here's an excerpt from *Pregnant with Hope* that describes one couple's experience:

Michelle: "We went to the church and said, „We're struggling! We feel so isolated. We need help. There's no place for us to go. There are all these groups, but where do we fit in? We don't fit in anywhere. We're not single, we're not married with children... we're childless."

We knew we weren't the only couple in this enormous church with infertility. There had to be others who were struggling like we were struggling, and felt alone, like we felt. We wanted to start a Bible study. We wanted to grow in our faith so that we could understand why this was happening, that we weren't alone, and so we could build community with others.

The church agreed to help us.

We needed to promote the new Bible study, so people knew about it. So, the communications director interviewed us and the church published an article about our infertility journey.

James: That felt great to me because it felt like we were reaching out to help other people with what we were going through. It felt good to be part of a group that could help people have discussions on infertility issues, and answer questions about Christianity.

Michelle: I was scared to death of no longer being anonymous. I was an executive and I didn't want the whole world to know about something as private as our infertility journey. But now, it would be known by anyone who read that newsletter. At the time, the church membership was close to 12,000—so that was pretty huge. For me, that was really scary.

James: It felt good to me. The spotlight was definitely on us because it was a story about our personal experience, but it felt like getting a weight off my back to get it out—and hopefully help other people. I felt pretty good that this might help us all out, somehow.

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Those are the core issues: the desire to protect your privacy, offset by the desire to create community. If you can muster the courage to share your story, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the supportive response you get. Other infertile couples will appreciate your candor and feel safe stepping forward to join your group. Meanwhile, people who know you—but didn't know your story—will generally respond one of two ways: 1) they'll express concern and love, or 2) they won't say a word, out of the desire to respect your privacy and the fear of saying the wrong thing.

Either way, the hard part is over.

So, now what?

Here's an overview of the process:

- Announce the formation of a Study & Support group for infertile couples.

- Schedule a first meeting. Choose a location that's easily accessible to participants, has plenty of parking, and offers a quiet, private place to gather.
- Identify a leader. Ideally, your discussion leader will be someone with infertility experience, and good facilitator skills. Possible candidates include clergy, counselors, and infertility "alumni"
- Encourage couples to RSVP if they intend to participate.
- Break the ice. At your first meeting, participants may be very self-conscious and uncomfortable sharing their story. Use a "get to know you" exercise to learn a bit about each couple: How did you first meet? What did you do on your first date? How did you propose? Etc.
- Introduce *Pregnant with Hope*. Describe the purpose for reading & discussing the book. Some couples may be unfamiliar with it. Have couples share what they hope to get out of the study. What issues do they want to see addressed? What preconceived ideas/biases are they bringing to this study?
- Emphasize confidentiality and respect for individual choices as your first meeting begins. The purpose of the group is not to give each other "the answers." Every couple will need to find their own path through infertility. The goal is to be mutually supportive.
- Meet weekly. Choose a starting time and meeting duration that suits people's schedules. Sunday morning? A weeknight? Allow 60-90 minutes for discussion and break-out groups. If possible, set aside time for coffee & snacks before or after each meeting. As relationships grow stronger, couples will want time to compare notes and share stories with one another outside the structured discussions of the group.
- Each week, discuss one chapter. Your group may respond more to the lesson in the chapter, or to the couple's story. Make time to discuss both—particularly how that couple's story dimensionalizes the lesson of the chapter. Also, share your answers to the "Pause and consider..." questions in the text, and any additional insights.
- Vary discussion formats to facilitate participation and minimize discomfort. For example:
 - Try breaking into smaller groups
 - Have men discuss questions separately from women
 - Use a "fish bowl" format—putting several people in the center of the circle to discuss, while others listen & learn
 - Bring written responses to the "Pause and consider" questions
 - Take turns sharing "text-to-self" insights (i.e. how was this particularly relevant to you and where you are on the journey?)
- Share prayer requests. It is a great comfort to have other couples praying for you. And it is a great gift to be entrusted with their prayer requests. Share your hopes and hurts with one another, and give each other the gift of prayer support.

- At every meeting... remember that a few guidelines make everyone more comfortable and discussions more productive:
 - Speak openly and invite support. Opinions differ on how best to address infertility (if there was one “right” answer, everyone would be on the same path). So, every couple’s choices are likely to be different somehow. That doesn’t mean anyone is “wrong.” Everyone is searching for a solution. Speak openly about your choices and invite others to support you.
 - Listen respectfully & offer support. Different denominations have different perspectives, and different couples make different choices. Listen to others’ stories with respect for those differences. Offer support any way you can.
 - Seek common ground. The purpose of scripture-based lessons is to seek God’s truth in the midst of infertility. That truth is available to all people. The purpose of making the study non-denominational is to help couples find community, rather than reasons to feel isolated and alone. Do what you can to encourage and reinforce a sense of mutual support.

For further information on starting a group, to download a leader’s discussion guide, or to ask additional questions, contact us.