

Support groups are a wonderful way for women to get together with other women who are facing similar issues in their lives. People in support groups can learn from one another and develop friendships to help them through challenging times.

Your church can be a wonderful source of support for those who need it. By starting and organizing support groups for women with particular needs, you can minister to them in a very practical way.

Here are some tips on getting started:

Identify the Need

Most likely, you've started thinking about support groups because you're aware of specific needs within your congregation. Support groups exist for a wide variety of reasons. There are support groups for people facing bereavement, divorced people, people with particular illnesses and disabilities, people struggling with addictions, families and caregivers of those who have disabilities ... the list goes on and on.

What needs do you see in your congregation and community that lead you to believe a support group is necessary? Target your planned support group, or groups, to meet a specific need.

Once Your Group Begins

- ◆ It's OK to start small. Don't be discouraged if you don't have a large number. In fact, if you wish to encourage lots of talk and sharing, groups larger than 12 might want to consider breaking into smaller groups.
- ◆ Share roles and responsibilities. Let group members get involved. It will help them feel ownership and keep you and other leaders from getting burned out.
- ◆ Discuss structure, purpose, and ground rules. Let members have input into what they want the group to become. Encourage everyone to help in setting guidelines for how meetings will go and what will be included.
- ◆ Establish a way of contacting and keeping in touch with group members. Share phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and set up a "telephone tree" or other system to make contact.
- ◆ Provide an informal time for socializing after the meeting, perhaps with refreshments.
- ◆ Evaluate periodically to see if group members are happy with where the group is going. Be flexible and prepared for changes in direction and focus as time goes by.



Department of Women's Ministries
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600 USA
301-680-6608
womensministries@gc.adventist.org
<http://wm.gc.adventist.org>



Organizing Support Groups in your church

Department of Women's Ministries
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Don't Re-Invent the Wheel

Get acquainted with the resources in your community. Many, many support groups for different needs are probably already in existence. Unless there's a very specific reason why your church needs to have its own support group on one of these issues, there's no need to re-invent the wheel. Rather than duplicating the services of a group that already exists, put your church members in touch with the resources that exist in the community.

If you do identify a need that's not being met by a support group in your community right now, find out if there's a national organization that deals with that problem. A quick search on the Internet can help you find umbrella organizations that can give you resources and tips on starting the specific type of support group you need.

Five P's of Organization

1. People

- ◆ Identify a few other people who would be interested in running (not just joining) a particular support group. Leading a group is a big responsibility for just one person: try to work with a team.
- ◆ Identify your target audience: do you want a support group just for people in your church, or do you want to welcome the community? Church-hosted support groups

open to community members are a wonderful outreach. Men can also be included but be certain the women are comfortable with their presence.

- ◆ Narrow the focus of your group. Decide exactly who the group will be for. For example, if you start a support group to deal with a particular illness, do you want to address only those who are experiencing the illness themselves or do you want to include family and caregivers as well?

2. Plan

Decide when and where you will have your first meeting. Choose a time that's good for as many of the interested people as you can, and a place that's accessible to everyone. Often you will want to host a support group in your church building, but there may be times when a neutral location in the community, or even someone's home, is more appropriate.

A meeting time of one to two hours, at least once a month, is usually best. Decide in advance what the format of your meetings will be, but allow for flexibility as the group develops and you discover the specific needs of group members.

Before you begin, visit other support groups that meet similar needs to get a sense of how they work and what's involved in a meeting. Talk to other people who have led support groups—they'll be able to give you a good idea of how to plan and prepare, and they will be able to put you in touch with additional resources.

3. Purpose

Support groups can have different purposes. Some are quite informal and simply involve group members discussing their needs and how they're coping. The purpose of a group like this is purely to provide mutual support. Other groups are more formal and structured: they have an educational purpose and people come there to learn more about their problems and solutions, often from a professional. Of course, even an educational-type group can and should have a "mutual-support" element.

4. Promote

Publicize the first meeting of your support group widely. Make sure it's well-promoted in church, and if you are inviting the community, publicize it in newspapers, on radio, and through posters, flyers, and even over the internet. Personally contact people who you know are interested and have a need.

5. Professionals

Support groups are about people receiving support and mutual help from each other. Therefore, they don't have to be expert-driven. You may, however, want to make use of any professional help you can find in your church or community. You may want to invite professionals to visit the group from time to time to share information.