

The English word Foyer is derived from foier, the French term for hearthside and projects an image of warmth and comfort. For untold generations it has been customary for Americans to welcome old friends, family members and newcomers into our homes by gathering at the central hearthside to celebrate special occasions, to enjoy times of fellowship and share moments of camaraderie. In tune with this time-honored tradition of hospitality the Anglican Community has for many years encouraged the formation of small informal Parish gatherings called Foyer Groups; small, close-knit groups of parishioners sharing a common bond of Christian love and concern for one another.

History of Foyer Groups

The idea originated at the Cathedral of St. Michael, in the Diocese of Coventry, England – born of the massive devastation inflicted at the height of the German Blitz on London and Coventry during World War II. During one of the many air raids conducted in 1940, the city's 14th century cathedral was completely destroyed as a result of the aerial bombardment. Rather than dwell on the violent loss of his beloved place of worship, the local Provost was inspired to found a ministry of reconciliation that he called the Community of the Cross and Nails. While sifting through the rubble of the cathedral, he gathered many of the old nails that had fallen among the ruins and was inspired to have them twisted together to form a cross. This cross of nails and the words "Father, Forgive" became the unifying symbol of the International Ministry of Reconciliation, a group of devout followers who believe that understanding between peoples, nations, and ideologies can come only when human beings meet and know each other as individuals. They truly live out the maxim "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

In 1967, the staff of the Coventry Cathedral began meeting together in small informal groups as a means "to bridge the divisions which subtly separate us one from another"; as a result of the meetings they noticed a powerful bond forming among the staff members who joined what they came to call the Foyer Group. Two years later, the Foyer movement spread to the congregation of Coventry Cathedral and then beyond. In time, Foyer Groups began springing up in parishes all over Britain and in America. Today, many Episcopal churches throughout the United States have foyer groups that promote fellowship amongst members and encourage the informal exchange of ideas, experiences and common problems within friendly home surroundings and in a Christian context.

So, what exactly are Foyer Groups?

Foyer Groups are a fun and easy way for parishioners to gather together on a regular but informal basis for purely social reasons – to enjoy one another's company, to strengthen bonds of community, to meet new members and just to get to know other people who share a common interest in Grace but with whom we might not otherwise interact. They provide a means to develop new friendships and deepen old ones and are a way to make our sometimes-too-large-seeming parish feel smaller and warmer.

There is no agenda or plan – just casual fellowship and a refreshing meal. Groups are made up of singles, couples, young people, retired folks, etc., in other words a cross

section of the parish. Out of the meetings, friendships develop among people who might not have any other opportunity to meet and get to know each other. Newcomers are especially invited to join one of the groups at any time.

Each small group of eight to twelve people meet once every four to six weeks during the church year, beginning in September and continuing through May, in the home of one of the members of the group. Generally, the host provides the main course while the other members fill in the rest of the meal such as appetizer, bread, salad, veggies, dessert, etc. Some groups have enjoyed gathering for a picnic lunch during good weather or even meeting at a local restaurant. Some groups have elected to study and discuss certain books, or incorporate an evening devotional into the gathering, while others gather for a purely social experience. The choice of available options is limited only by the collective imagination of the group, but the main idea is for the gatherings to simply focus on Christian fellowship, a refreshing meal and relaxed conversation.

New groups form each fall, and new members are always welcome. The groups are put together randomly in order to add an element of spontaneity, such that each of us might have the opportunity to get to know others in the parish who may be outside our normal circle of acquaintance. In other words, this is a great way to meet and get to know those you might not have a chance to visit with otherwise.

Sound interesting to you? Want to learn more about Foyer Groups? If so, keep your eyes open and your ears to the rails in the coming months for more information and a special invitation to join one of the groups that are planned to be formed in the fall.

Foyer Group Q&A

Q. How will Foyer Groups be set up?

A. Once you sign up, you'll be randomly grouped with three or four other singles and/or couples, potentially from different circles of the parish community and in varying phases of life. We will take into consideration your preferences regarding smoking, alcohol, and pets in the home and will mail you contact information for your group, as well as a list of suggestions for how to get started.

Q. I'm not much of a cook. Do I really have to be able to prepare a full meal for eight or ten people in order to join a Foyer Group?

A. Foyer Group gatherings are intended to be shared meals, and that includes the preparation. Typically, the host might provide the main dish and beverages, with other members contributing the appetizer, salad, side dish, bread, and/or dessert. Many grocery stores and restaurants offer tasty, freshly prepared take-out dishes that you can serve. Those with the inspiration and capability to prepare a full meal on their own are, of course, welcome to do so, but that's not the expectation.

Q. I'm afraid my home isn't grand enough to host other parishioners. Will my standard of living be judged if I join a Foyer Group?

A. Here's what Foyer Groups are not: they're not a House Beautiful tour, they're not a Martha Stewart showcase, and they're not an Iron Chef cooking competition. They are casual gatherings where the focus is on fellowship and friendship, conversation and conviviality. We meet each other where we live, and accept our surroundings as they are just as God does.

Q. My home/condo/apartment isn't large enough to hold eight to ten people for a sit-down dinner. Can I still join a Foyer Group?

A. Who says the meal must be a sit-down dinner? There are several alternatives. You could plan a menu of finger- and fork-food that can be eaten from plates held on laps while sitting on sofas, chairs, or the floor. Or, when it's your turn to host, arrange for the group to meet at a local buffet-style restaurant, or reserve the picnic area at a county park and host a cookout.

Q. I have food allergies. How can I be sure that other group members' meal contributions will be suitable for me?

A. If you have food allergies, dietary restrictions, or strong taste preferences, please simply inform your group of your concerns at the beginning so that everyone understands what they must consider when planning their menus. All participants should make their best effort to accommodate the needs of their fellow group members.

Q. Are Foyer Groups for adults only, or are children welcome to participate?

A. Whether your group's gatherings are for grown-ups only or include kids too, is largely up to the membership and will depend on the ages of the children in the group's families. Hosting a meal for just the adults allows for undistracted conversations, while including children unquestionably livens up the evening. The group should attempt to strike a comfortable balance that accommodates the needs and concerns of all members..

Q. Is there some "program" or entertainment we should offer when we gather?

A. The primary goal of Foyer Groups is to extend and deepen ties within the parish by giving people a chance to get to know one another better, and that is most easily accomplished through conversation. There is no requirement for structured debate or religious experience (well, it would be nice if you say grace before eating!). However, if the group is so inclined, you could play a party game after dinner, or you could arrange to attend a movie together and then discuss it afterward over the meal. For some people who struggle to make small talk with those they don't know well yet, having something in particular to do or to discuss helps facilitate the process of becoming acquainted. Each family is encouraged to personalize their hosting turn according to their interests. Just chatting and nibbling is fine too!