

# Core Groups

The background of the cover is a dark, almost black, field filled with intricate, glowing patterns of light. These patterns consist of numerous thin, overlapping lines in shades of orange, red, and yellow, which swirl and curve to form a large, central, circular shape. The overall effect is reminiscent of a nebula or a complex, organic structure, with the light appearing to emanate from within the swirls.

*a guide to getting started*



## WHAT IS A CORE GROUP?

A Core Group is a small group of church members (normally 3 or 4, and certainly no more than 5) who want to grow as Christian disciples and encourage each other to do the same.

- **A CORE GROUP IS A PLACE OF HONESTY.** Without honesty a Core Group will not work. You need to trust each other and be willing to 'tell it how it is'. You also need to have courage to 'speak the truth in love' to one another. Inevitably, it takes time for trust to build, but it will grow quicker if people are willing to risk honesty from the start.
- **A CORE GROUP IS A PLACE OF ACCOUNTABILITY.** In a Core Group you are inviting other members to spur you on in your Christian life. You are giving them permission to ask you hard questions and to hold you to commitments that you make.
- **A CORE GROUP IS A PLACE OF SUPPORT.** Here you should be able to share concerns, joys and challenges from the whole of your life, because the goal is to work out discipleship in the whole of life. The Bible calls us to 'bear one another's burdens.'
- **A CORE GROUP IS A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH GOD.** It's a great place to pray for each other, to seek God together. It can also be a place to study the Bible, with a view to honestly applying to your lives.
- **A CORE GROUP IS A PLACE OF GROWTH.** It's a place for encouraging one another to 'press on towards the goal', for celebrating successes as well as sharing struggles. Some Core Groups may last many years with the same members. Others will be time-limited or be reconstituted with different members as people move on.

### A CORE GROUP IS NOT...

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- **JUST A GROUP OF FRIENDS.** It helps if you like each other, and friendships will inevitably deepen! But the primary purpose of the group is discipleship, not friendship. Sometimes being mates can actually make it more difficult to stick to the task.

- **A PLACE TO GOSSIP ABOUT CHURCH.** In fact, you need not talk about church at all. This is about your relationship with Jesus as Lord.
- **A THERAPY GROUP.** In a Core Group you are not attempting to solve each other's problems. Nor is it enough to listen, pray, advise and leave one another to manage alone. Rather, you are there to help each other follow the Lord Jesus, and to walk alongside each other as you do so.

## HOW DOES A CORE GROUP OPERATE?

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A Core Group comes together by mutual agreement. Look for two or three people that you would like to meet with. They do not need to be in your home group or Missional Community (though they can), but they should be the same gender as you.

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## CORE GROUPS WILL NOT BE ORGANISED CENTRALLY BY THE CHURCH.

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We suggest that you meet every fortnight. Meetings need not be long. An hour can suffice. In practice, you will take turns to speak. The others will listen, question and pray for you. At times it will be right to offer advice.

One simple way to run a meeting of a Core Group is to take the '4R' values of St. Nic's based on Matthew 28. 16-20:

- **RESPOND.** Jesus is Lord. We live our lives in response to his authority.
- **RELATE.** God is love. We relate to one another within the love of God.
- **REACH.** Jesus has commissioned us to 'go and make disciples'.
- **RESOURCE.** We are to train disciples in 'everything I have commanded you.'

(You can find a full explanation of these values in Appendix 2 on page 17 of this booklet.)

Here are two simple ways of meeting as a Core Group based on the 4Rs.

**R1-RESPOND** *What?*

How am I doing in my relationship with Christ? What is he saying to me? Am I living my life in obedient response to him?

**R2-RELATE** *Who?*

How am I doing in my relationships? Do they reflect the love of God the Trinity? Who is the Lord pointing me to?

**R4-RESOURCE** *What?*

Am I being well resourced for my faith through the Bible, prayer, worship and fellowship? Am I resourcing/discipling others?

**R3-REACH** *Who? How?*

How am I doing in my witness? Am I reaching others for Christ? Who? How?

**4R SNAPSHOT**

- Draw the simple chart above (without the supplementary questions) on a large piece of paper.
- In turns, write a score out of 10 in each quadrant (R1, R2, R3, R4) indicating how you are doing in that area.
- Now ask questions / talk about the scores.
- Pray for one another, perhaps encouraging one another in a particular area.

**ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS**

- The first two appendices have questions that can be used in your group to help you dig deeper. Both sets are based on our church values, the '4 Rs' derived from Matthew 28. 18-20.

The questions in Appendix 1A & 1B all relate to our personal journey as a disciple. They enable us to focus on how we are getting on in our personal lives. They provide an opportunity to be honest about our actions, habits and emotions.

Appendix 1C, on the other hand, focuses on our corporate discipleship recognising that Jesus never had only one disciple.

He sent out his disciples in pairs. Jesus rarely spent time with his disciples 1:1. (His conversation with Peter in John 21 is the exception rather than the rule.) When the New Testament uses 'you' it is generally in the plural form. The pictures used in the Bible to describe Christians are corporate: branches on the vine, a temple, a household, a body with many parts. We are the bride of Christ collectively. So we hope that these questions will begin to soften our instinctive individualism and enable us to live out the life of Christ together.

- You can either come to the group with a particular question that is relevant to your life at the moment; OR you can just invite the group to use the questions relating to one of the 'Rs' as this is an area you'd particularly like help in at the moment; OR you can choose questions at random to ask each other.

As time goes by, it will be important to refer back to what was shared / said / decided at previous meetings. What action has been taken? Is this still an issue? etc. It may be helpful to keep a confidential group log of what is shared.

## OTHER METHODS

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(These methods are not recommended for routine meetings, but could be helpful if you feel that you are 'stuck in a rut'. It should also be said that *all* meetings of Core Groups are assumed to be Bible-based and Spirit-directed!)

### BIBLE-BASED

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- The Core Group is not really the place for Bible *study*. However, if one of the group is prepared to do all the background study outside of the group, there is no reason why systematic Bible reading and discussion should not be part of your group meetings. Again, the focus has to be on application.
- You must always be vigilant that a Bible-based approach does not simply give you an excuse to hide from each other and avoid the hard work of accountability.

## **SPIRIT-DIRECTED**

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- Begin with worship. Often it is helpful to use a Psalm as a springboard into praise and worship.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to come and lead you.
- Share whatever the Spirit speaks through word, picture or scripture.
- Discuss how whatever the Spirit gives may apply to you.
- Follow the direction of the Spirit in praying for each other according to the agenda He sets.
- As the operation of the Spirit always contains a certain percentage of our humanity, you must be careful not to allow this method to be a way of subtly bringing your own agenda to the group.

## **PRAYING FOR FRIENDS, FAMILY & NEIGHBOURS**

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- Our main goal is to make disciples. It would be helpful to write a list of up to five people that you are praying for regularly to become Christians.
- Try to identify people you spend at least an hour with each week.
- Write those names on a card and pray for them in your Core Group each time you meet.
- Remember that although the goal is that they come to faith, this is likely to be through a long series of little steps. Pray for one step after another.

## **WHAT IF WE RUN INTO PROBLEMS?**

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There are certain problems that may arise in Core Groups. Here are some ways of dealing with them.

### **A MEMBER OF THE GROUP HAS A PROBLEM THAT IS TOO BIG FOR US TO HANDLE.**

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Core Groups are not therapy groups. They should not be focused on problems, rather on obeying Jesus. If someone has a problem that is

starting to dominate the group it is important that the individual receives help outside the group. In the first instance, speak with the Pastoral Coordinator for the service you attend. (9am – Wendy Sayers. 10.30 – Jane Silvester. 7pm – Julie Bignell.) Either the Pastoral Coordinator will find a way to help, or she will refer you to Steve.

## **OUR GROUP HAS LOST ITS WAY**

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The most likely problem a Core Group will face is loss of discipline. This may be discipline in meeting, discipline in sticking to the task, failing to be honest and open, or becoming too casual. If you notice this, it is your job to bring it humbly to the attention of the rest of the group. Together you need to ‘raise the bar’. Another problem that could arise is that one person takes more than their fair share of time. Occasionally this may be necessary, but if it becomes the norm the group will need to redress the balance. If it becomes impossible to get back on track it is ok to disband the group and seek new partners. However, this should be a last resort having tried hard to resolve the issues.

## **A MEMBER OF OUR GROUP IS NOT BEING TRUTHFUL**

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This happens. (‘Humankind cannot bear very much reality.’ – T S Eliot) We all have different tolerance levels of truthfulness and openness and it will take time to build up trust. However, a Core Group will be compromised if one member is not willing to be truthful. When we suspect that this is the case it is tempting to become less open ourselves. This is a mistake. Have courage to keep being honest. When appropriate ask why the person finds it difficult to be truthful. The principles of Matthew 18.15-17 are helpful here: first a private conversation, then a public conversation, then (as a very last resort) you may need to ask the individual to leave the group.

## **WE NEED AN ADDITION(S) TO THE GROUP**

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From time to time people will move away or cease being part of your Core Group for some other reason. It can be hard for a new



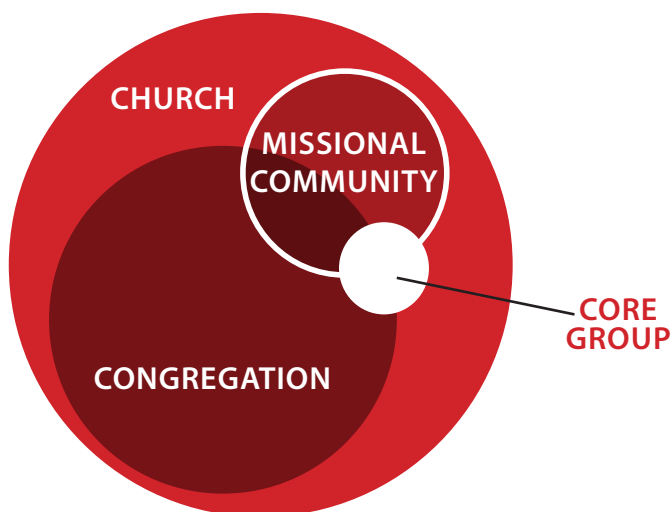
member to come in if they have not shared the history of the group. Similarly, it can be hard to share with a new member the level of closeness and trust that has built up over time. However, if you are sticking to your task of encouraging one another in Christian discipleship (rather than just becoming a friendship group) it will be easier to absorb a new member. It will be important for the group to share whatever ground rules it has established so that there are no false expectations. A group should always have at least three members.

## CORE GROUPS & MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

There are several levels of community in which people relate at St Nic's (and in many churches). The most obvious is at the congregational level. We tend to identify with one particular service and serve and make friends in that context. One level up from that is the church as a whole. St Nic's rarely meets as a whole church, Central Prayer (six-eight times each year) and the weekend away (in alternate years) are two examples.

For the past few years we have been developing a missional culture and growing leaders who are able to lead communities of people in whole-life discipleship. These communities are called Missional Communities (MCs) and are built around a mission objective. They are complimented by Core Groups of 3 - 5 people. Core Groups can consist of people who belong to the same Missional Community, but this need not be the case. Core Groups are vital in the development of a missional culture.

Missional Communities can welcome in those who don't yet know Christ, but would like to find out more. They can provide a flexible format where we can welcome new people. They are mission-focussed, and provide opportunities for peoples' gifts to grow and be released. MCs can be built around neighbourhoods, networks or needs.



Examples of MCs that have emerged so far are:

- **NEIGHBOURHOOD:** a number of MCs are developing based in different areas of the city 'Northern Lights' and 'Westlife' for example.
- **NETWORK:** 'New Community' and 'Gathered' two groups for people in their 20's and 30's sharing life together and reaching out to their friends and 'Family Matters' a group supporting families.
- **NEED:** 'Simplicity', a group committed to working with areas of social justice.

This journey has been challenging and we have learned a lot during it. We have discovered that MCs are not the real point of the exercise! They are just a natural expression of Christian community when our values are shaped by the gospel and when we take following Jesus seriously.

However, these larger groups can't provide the same level of accountability or encouragement for our individual discipleship growth. These things are best found in Core Groups. Core groups are a great way of helping us to grow as Christian disciples, because they provide a place for us to relate in some depth with a few others.

*For further information, please visit [www.stnics.org/mcs](http://www.stnics.org/mcs)*

See the note about using these questions on page 5

### R1 – RESPOND

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1. Do I have a vision for my life?
2. Do I have a vision for the work I'm involved in?
3. What am I grateful for?
4. Do I pursue intimacy with Jesus?
5. Do I make space for prayer and journaling?
6. Do I study the Bible for me?
7. Am I teachable and accountable?
8. Is there anything that God has told me to do which I have ignored?
9. What is God saying to me?
10. Am I willing to take risks?

### R2 – RELATE

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11. Is my family happy?
12. How are my friendships?
13. What do I do when I'm hungry / angry / lonely / tired?
14. Am I a slave to work, friendships, hobbies or habits?
15. Do I manage my time well?
16. Do I walk in grace and forgiveness or do I judge people?
17. Is there anybody whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticise, hold resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
18. Am I defeated in any part of my life – jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
19. Do I give generously of time, money, attention, resources, and skills?

20. What relationships sustain me and 'fuel' me for life?

### R3 – REACH

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21. Am I making / maintaining relationships with non-Christians?
22. How do I spend my spare time?
23. Do I keep a healthy balance between church, work and home life?
24. For whom am I praying regularly?
25. Do I make myself vulnerable to others?
26. How can I serve the people I see regularly?
27. Am I following the nudges of the Spirit (e.g. to talk to / visit others)?
28. Am I living with integrity?
29. Am I taking time to listen to and understand others?

### R4 – RESOURCING

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30. What am I filling my head with (reading, TV, music, internet)?
31. Did the Bible live for me today?
32. How am I? (How is my health? Am I eating well? Am I sleeping well? Am I getting enough exercise? Taking enough rest?)
33. How am I making the most of the fourth commandment? (Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.)
34. Who are the friends who give to me more than they take?
35. How am I emotionally?
36. What do I need to be more effective for God?
37. Who am I mentoring (officially or informally)?
38. Do I have a recent testimony to share?
39. Am I passing on to others the things that I am learning?

## APPENDIX 1B: PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

40. What experience have you had of prayer / meditation this week?
41. What temptations did you face this week?
42. What movements of the Holy Spirit did you experience this week?
43. What opportunities have you had to serve others week?
44. In what ways have you encountered Christ in your studies of the bible this week?

These are taken from Richard Foster's book '*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*'

## APPENDIX 1C: CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

See the note about using these questions on page 5

### R1 – RESPOND

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1. When and in what way did you last respond to God with the rest of the church?
2. How are you responding to the current sermon series / teaching of the church?
3. In what ways are you participating in corporate prayer (e.g. Central Prayer)?
4. How are you extending your involvement with a Missional Community?
5. How is God prompting you in regards to serving at St Nic's?
6. In what ways have you sensed God saying anything to you for the benefit of the church?
7. What are the ways in which you find it easiest to hear from God?

## R2 – RELATE

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8. Whom do you serve alongside? How could you get to know them better?
9. How could you deepen relationships within your Missional Community?
10. What relationships do you have within the church with people outside your own age group and life stage?
11. Whose name do you need to learn?
12. Who have you noticed who seems vulnerable? How could you support them?
13. Who is God calling you to pray for on a regular basis?
14. Is there a regular, everyday, activity that you could do with someone else?
15. Who do you spend most time with from St Nic's? Is there someone else you could invite into this?
16. Is there someone who has not been around recently? Could you contact them?

## R3 – REACH

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17. Have you undertaken a 'Random Act of Kindness' for a stranger recently?
18. When did you last spend time with someone else's People of Peace (PoPs)\*?
19. Do you pray regularly for other people's PoPs?
20. When did you last give time or financial support to something / someone else to the detriment of your own comfort?
21. In what ways does your Missional Community look like 'good news' to those you are trying to reach?

\* A Person of Peace (see Luke 10.1-12, especially verses 5-8) is someone who likes you, welcomes you into their lives, attends to your needs and who is receptive to the Good News of Jesus. Jesus advises his disciples to invest heavily in these people, develop the relationship and share the message and power of Jesus with them.

22. Does your Missional Community do enough 'out' activities in its monthly rhythm?
23. What does it look like to 'act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God', and who would you do that with?
24. What is on your heart for mission? Are there others who share this vision with you?
25. How do you regularly connect with your neighbours, or with the city? Have you introduced any of your Christian friends to these people

## **R4 – RESOURCING**

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26. Who (younger in the faith) are you discipling?
27. Who is discipling you?
28. What has God taught you recently and to whom could you pass this on?
29. How do you serve the church body? Who are you training as a potential successor?
30. When was the last time you tried something new in your Christian journey?
31. When did you last participate in something in church life that was a challenge to you?
32. Do you have a gift that is being under used in the mission of the church?
33. What has inspired you recently and with whom did you share it?

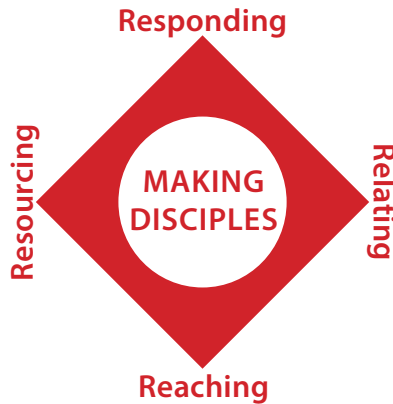


*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Matthew 28.16 – 20

## THE HEART OF OUR CALLING IS CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY.

The 'Great Commission' provides us with a template for our calling as a church, The 4Rs Diamond. We are called to...



- **RESPOND** – *all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore...*
- **RELATE** – *baptising them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*
- **REACH** – *go and make disciples.*
- **RESOURCE** – *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

Values produce ethos, “the way we do things around here”.

## **1. PRAYERFUL OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST (*RESPOND*)**

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Jesus is Lord. His authority is supreme.

Seeking God and listening to him through prayer is our top priority.

## **2. RELATIONSHIPS (*RELATE*)**

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God is Trinity. Relationship is at the heart of life and gives it meaning. We are baptised into the community of the Trinity. We will actively challenge the spirit of the age, which is individualist and consumerist.

## **3. MISSION (*REACH*)**

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Mission is at the heart of God. God sent Jesus; Jesus sends us. We will be a missionary church.

## **4. MULTIPLICATION (*RESOURCE*)**

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God has given us his Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture. Jesus is with us ‘to the end of the age’. Drawing on these resources, we will be a resourcing church, equipping people to follow Christ in the culture in which we live. The authority and presence of Christ impinge on every aspect of life.

## OUR VISION

What does it look like when we put all this into practice?

### **RESPOND *TRANSFORMING ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS***

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- A centre for on-going prayer in the middle of the city.
- Rhythms of prayer in our daily lives and in our corporate life.
- A Church Leadership Team committed to seeking God in prayer for the direction of the church.

### **RELATE *AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY***

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- Promoting healthy, godly relationships in the church.
- Missional communities (around 12 – 30 people united around a mission focus) meeting in a pattern that they have worked out.
- Core Groups (3 – 5 people) meeting in homes about once a month.
- Mentoring / accountability partnerships.
- Healing ministries that restore individuals and relationships.

### **REACH *MISSION HEARTED, MAKING DISCIPLES***

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- Missional communities as the primary vehicle for outreach, demonstrating an attractive way of life that is an outworking of Christian discipleship.
- The church building used as an easily-accessed place of Christian hospitality, prayer, healing and creativity.
- Explorations into the culture and aspirations of those around us, building relationships with them and sharing the gospel appropriately.
- Pioneering outreach to groups who see the city as a place to gather.

## RESOURCE *GROWING AND EQUIPPING DISCIPLES*

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- Preaching, teaching and discussions constantly exploring the interface between the unchanging Christian faith and the constantly changing world.
  - Courses, lectures, exhibitions, retreats.
  - We will develop simple, transferable theological tools for living the life to be passed on to new disciples.
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A Core Group is a small group of church members (normally three or four, and certainly no more than five) who want to grow as Christian disciples and encourage each other to do the same. As they grow and develop they will become places of honesty, accountability, support and personal growth.

Core Groups will not be administered centrally, so we hope that this booklet will help you work out how you can form and develop a group which will help you, and your fellow group members, on the path to maturity in Christ.

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st Nic's  
church Nottingham  
[www.stnics.org](http://www.stnics.org)

79 Maid Marian Way Nottingham NG1 6AE  
0115 9524600 | [office@stnics.org](mailto:office@stnics.org) | [www.stnics.org](http://www.stnics.org)

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