

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT LAUNCHING STARTING POINT AT YOUR CHURCH

### *Who is Starting Point for?*

There are three main types of people for whom Starting Point is designed:

- Seekers - those who are curious about God, Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity
- Starters - those who are new to a relationship with Jesus Christ
- Returners - those who have some church experience, but have been away for a while

Starting Point is not for everyone. Some people may be so unreceptive toward Christianity that they cannot engage in meaningful discussions about issues of faith without compromising the environment. Or, they may be unwilling to commit to reading the materials, engaging with the media resources, and attending the group meetings. In other words, people who have extremely significant barriers to the gospel message will likely not benefit from nor contribute to a Starting Point group. In addition, Starting Point is not for those who have substantial church experience and are looking for an environment to increase their biblical knowledge will likely be dissatisfied. Even though Starting Point covers some of the most challenging issues of the Christian faith, the environment is not focused on the acquisition of biblical knowledge. Also, seekers, starters, and returners are often intimidated by those we consider more mature Christians.

### *What is the mission and strategy of Starting Point?*

The mission and strategy of Starting Point is *to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ by creating a conversational environment where they can explore faith and experience community.*

There are three extremely important aspects of this statement. 1) **Explore faith.** The first is to offer a forum for people to explore, investigate, survey, discuss, discover, experiment with, and *examine issues of faith.* 2) **Experience community.** The second goal is to provide a *taste of community.* Of course, long-term relationships will not fully form in just a few months. But in light of the discussions that take place and the common bond seekers, starters, and returners share, participants can experience the beginnings of authentic community. Ultimately, Starting Point is successful if participants want to continue exploring faith and experiencing community in a long-term small group setting. 3) **A conversational environment.** The third objective is to *provide a conversational environment,* not a teaching forum, an apologetics course, or a class on Christian theology. Naturally those elements may take place from time to time, but at its core, Starting Point is a conversational environment where discussion happens. Thus, Starting Point leaders are *not* teachers, but facilitators and fellow sojourners. In fact, we believe the language we use to describe the environment says so much about it. So we do not to use the terms *teacher, student, class, or curriculum.* Instead we use *leader, group member, group, and conversation guide.*

### *What is the size of a typical group?*

Starting Point groups are typically ten to twelve participants and two to four leaders (for a maximum of sixteen people). Each group has at least two leader units, where one “leader unit” is one person or a married couple. This includes apprentice leaders.

### *When and where do groups meet?*

The entire Starting Point experience is ten weeks. Each group meeting lasts seventy-five minutes. Sometimes the discussion will go longer, but we strongly encourage leaders to end on time. Most groups at North Point Ministries meet on Sunday during worship service times at church campuses. This allows us to provide childcare for Starting Point group members who need it. Also, it can be less intimidating for seekers who already come to a Sunday morning service but may be anxious about going to a stranger’s house at a different time. However, we’ve also had success with some groups that meet in homes on weeknights.

One key aspect of the Starting Point environment is the physical setting. The settings where the participants interact influence their experience. Because we want a comfortable, conversational atmosphere, we have designed environments with that in mind. For example, we do not set up the chairs in rows facing a podium because group members will feel like they are in a classroom setting and assume a passive posture. By placing the chairs in a circle, it communicates equality and encourages more interactive participation from members.

At North Point Community Church, we have eight Starting Point rooms on our hallway. Each room is decorated like the living room of a house. This includes lamps, side tables, mirrors, artwork, and comfortable furniture. One question often asked is if Starting Point groups should meet in homes (or other locations) or on the church campus. If Starting Point groups meet in homes, there is an increased level of intimacy much like the small group atmosphere. The tradeoff is that meeting in homes on weeknights may not be as convenient for participants, especially for providing childcare. Starting Point can work in either setting; the choice depends on the unique variables of your culture, location, and the particular needs of the members of the groups.

### *What do the materials include?*

- Conversation Guide: a full color guide divided into ten chapters with ten audio messages on five CD’s.
- Leader Notes: an essential resource to assist leaders in facilitating groups.
- Starting Point Bible: a TNIV version of the Scriptures with custom-written book introductions and numerous Starting Point specific articles for group members.

We provide at no charge a Bible for all of our Starting Point participants. The benefit of everyone in the group using the same Bible is that page numbers can be referenced when discussing a specific passage.

In addition, downloadable Leader Notes are essential in helping leaders facilitate each group Meeting (available for a small fee). These notes offer background information and suggestions for leading the discussion for each chapter and are invaluable to our leaders. We encourage leaders to insert them into a leader's notebook, along with group contact information and any other helpful resources or articles.

### *How do you enlist leaders?*

Choosing the right leaders is essential. In order to do this, we have implemented several steps in our leader selection process. This process can take one to two months.

1. *Recommendation.* We don't advertise for Starting Point leaders. The Starting Point environment is so appealing and dynamic that we often have people approach us about leading. Typically those who lead a group tell their friends about the great experience and recommend that they lead a group. As you might expect, the best leader prospects almost always come through recommendations from experienced leaders.
2. *Application.* Everyone who desires to be a Starting Point leader completes an application. We email them a form to fill out and email back. It includes general background information, a request for three references, and a few open-ended spiritual and theological questions.
3. *References.* After the potential leader fills out an application, we follow up and contact the references they listed, usually via email. There are specific questions that we ask each reference in order to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the applicant.
4. *Interview.* Each applicant has a one-on-one interview with one of our staff.
5. *Approval.* After reading the application, following up with references, sitting down for a one-on-one interview, and prayer, the decision is usually clear whether or not this leader is a good fit. We will call the applicants that are approved and go through the next steps with them.
6. *New Leader Orientation.* After approval, new Starting Point leaders attend a two hour orientation to prepare them for leadership. We offer new leader orientations about four times a year. This begins the equipping process, which will be addressed in greater detail below.
7. *Apprenticeship.* The first time people lead a Starting Point group, we connect them with an experienced leader. In this way the new leader can learn the dynamics of leading a Starting Point group with someone who has been there before. The experienced leader should attempt to offer three specific benefits to an apprentice:
  - Good leadership modeled.
  - Opportunities to lead when ready.
  - Constructive feedback.

Note: apprentices are considered full leaders in the group members' eyes, and all leaders should facilitate the Starting Point group.

### *How do you equip leaders?*

There are numerous avenues for equipping leaders. By incorporating all of them into our training, we hope to connect with all of our leaders and their different learning styles.

- New leader orientation.
- Apprenticing.
- Monthly leader huddles. These brief meetings include stories for celebration, brainstorming, and idea sharing.
- Focused training events. Periodically, we host an all-day or weekend event with all the small group leaders in the church.
- Member evaluations.
- Co-leader evaluations. After each group ends, we offer a survey for co-leaders, and encourage them to meet together to provide constructive feedback to one another.
- One-on-one staff development. Leaders meet with a staff member, usually once per group life cycle, for encouragement, advice, celebration, and prayer.
- Online resources.

### *How do you assimilate people into Starting Point groups?*

Getting people into groups is an important aspect of Starting Point. At NPM churches, we have chosen to offer Starting Point Orientations as the best method to introduce potential participants and provide group opportunities. We have orientations on the first and third Sunday's each month giving people the opportunity to sign up for Starting Point frequently. We host a brief, twenty minute orientation after each service and primarily explain the Starting Point environment and answer questions about logistics. The benefits of regular orientations is that it is very convenient for people to get into a group, and we can immediately address the spiritual hunger that God may have stirred in people during our worship service. However, depending on the size of your church and the interest level, you may elect to have monthly, quarterly, or seasonal orientations.

### *Do long-term small groups use the Starting Point materials?*

Yes, NPM churches have many long-term small groups that have utilized the Starting Point materials as one of their curriculum choices. Some groups have seekers, starters, or returners involved and therefore, Starting Point is a good choice, especially at the beginning of the life of the group. However, given the right mindset, every group could benefit from using the Starting Point materials. New or farther down the journey, everyone profits from spending time exploring the message of the Bible and how God has revealed himself in our lives.