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Formational Pods- Frequently Asked Questions

To find out about 'Pods' we'd encourage you first to look at the Pods page on our website. This sets out the vision and purpose of Pods as well as what a gathering typically looks and how it might differ from other small groups such as prayer triplets

<https://hopeoxford.org/join-in/life-groups-formational-pods/>

We'd also encourage you to read and meditate on Ephesians 4:11-15 as the purpose of Pods is to support us maturing in Jesus.

Pods are distinctive in that their focus is entirely on someone's personal discipleship to Jesus. They are not designed to be the drivers of pastoral care or service to meet someone's practical needs or places for in depth prayer ministry for inner healing. There are other spaces in the life of our church for these important things, most notably through Life Groups (hence our encouragement that wherever possible those in Pods are also part of a Life Group). Occasionally there may be times when support from church leaders or others in leadership with Hope Vineyard is also required.

Pods are also not necessarily the places where you'll find your closest friends at Hope because of their focus. We do anticipate that friendships will form and deepen and there certainly needs to be a level of relational safety and trust amongst Pod members for them to be effective. However we'd encourage you not to expect your Pod members to be your best friends. If friendship, which is vitally important to all of us, is something you're in need of, we'd invite you to regularly attend a Life Group, Sundays,

as well as women's and men's events, and even take a risk in inviting someone for a coffee.

1. **How will I get myself into a Pod?** We have decided that we will ask those interested in being part of a Pod to list a few people they'd feel confident being with before we place people into groups of generally 3's and 4's. This is to try and ensure that everyone is included who wants to be. However there is no perfect way of doing this and this method will not guarantee that Pod groupings always work for everyone (see question 7). In the future and maybe as the church grows, we envisage people will form their own Pods. It is also the case that changing who you're in a Pod with from time to time can be beneficial as we can all learn things from different people.
2. **How long are Pod gatherings?** There is no exact time limit, but we'd suggest that each person has 15 minutes to share during the 'story' part of a gathering and then 15 minutes at least is dedicated for prayer at the end. Hence 1hr 15 mins is a good time to set aside for a group of 3. We'd also encourage you to discuss timings when you first gather as a Pod and be quite strict in keeping to time to ensure everyone gets an equal opportunity to share and be prayed for.
3. **It sounds like a lot to fit into one gathering, Story, Practice and Prayer. Can we cut out bits?** Yes, your Pod is your Pod so agree when you first meet how you want to run things. Having said that, we'd really encourage you to stick to the structure, as much as you can for the first 3 months. Experience suggests that these elements are likely to provide the most benefit in terms of your discipleship (especially the Story and Prayer sections- the bit about exploring spiritual practices is something you may want to engage in every 3 to 6 months)
4. **When and where might Pod gatherings occur?** When and where you meet for a Pod gathering is entirely up to those in the Pod, hence we'd suggest you have these discussions the first time you get together. Key things to bear in mind are; what is practical for everyone (it needs to feel manageable with everyone's schedules

and capacities) and where do people feel most comfortable meeting (it needs to feel 'safe' enough so that everyone can speak honestly and feel listened to). Pods typically meet once a month (although they can be more frequent than this).

5. **What if someone in the Pod can't make a gathering?** This can be something you discuss when you first meet. You could decide to look for an alternative date that everyone can do or you may decide to go ahead for that month without that particular person. If your Pod decides to meet fortnightly, this would potentially be less of an issue.
6. **What about confidentiality?** Discuss this during your first Pod gathering. It is generally always helpful if everyone agrees not to share what is discussed inside Pods with others outside the Pod without a person's explicit consent as this helps build trust. If something is a safeguarding matter involving a child or an adult with support needs, then the rule of confidentiality doesn't apply. If you're concerned that something may be a safeguarding issue please talk to our Hope Safeguarding Leads. See website for details of who to contact <https://hopeoxford.org/about-us/safeguarding>
7. **What if my Pod isn't working and I don't comfortable with the people I'm with?** Remember Pods are designed for formation primarily rather than friendship, however sometimes the relational dynamics can be difficult. This isn't necessarily anyone's fault or a sign of failure. Sometimes the 'gelling' isn't instant but comes with time, sometimes it simply doesn't happen. This is why we'd suggest you agree to reviewing how things are going at a certain point (we'd suggest a review at 3-6 months). This then allows people to think about how things could work better or for a person/s to step out of a Pod if necessary. If this happens that person could potentially join a different Pod. Adding someone to an existing Pod needs to be thought about carefully and everyone in the Pod needs to be in agreement.
8. **What if you don't feel comfortable confessing patterns of sin/ sharing where you've stepped away from God (*Pod question 4, see Pods webpage*) with your Pod?** The questions act as invitations and only you can decide what you do or not share with others.

Generally speaking, taking a risk by being honest contributes to greater intimacy in relationships and encourages others to be honest, however if sharing will leave you feeling shame or you do not yet feel safe enough with those in your Pod, then don't share quite as openly. One idea to support you and those in your Pod might be to agree that for the first 3 months you won't answer this question to allow for trust to deepen.

Final Tips:

- **Pods come with challenges** - Following Jesus and wanting to go deeper with him is not without challenge. It will likely at times involve suffering and/or opposition, Jesus promised us this. Relationships are also not without their challenges so be realistic about the likelihood that you may not always see eye to eye with other people. To support trust building and effective communication we'd encourage Pods to meet in person wherever possible.
- **Practice your listening skills, including during the Prayer time**- during the Story section when you are listening to someone else, try not to interrupt them with questions (except to occasionally clarify something if it was not clear), your thoughts and experiences or to offer advice. You are there to simply be a witness to what God is doing in their life just as they are to be that for you. Similarly during Prayer, don't fill the time with long, wordy prayers. Trust that God knows it all anyway and your role is to invite his spirit to come and touch that person. Ask to lay a hand on the person, say 'come Holy Spirit' and wait. Do feel free to briefly share any impressions, pictures, phrases, passages of scripture that come to mind for the person's encouragement.