



The Essential Guide

for group leaders, hosts, ministers, or anyone interested

What is Good Soil?

Good Soil is a resource for small groups. It is a series of prepared group sessions to encourage churches in nurturing and growing Christians through Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. It was first devised by Andy Murphy and Mel Wheeler in the Market Harborough Circuit in 2022.

You can find the whole series with the following link: <https://www.eastmercia-methodists.org.uk/churches-1/market-harborough/good-soil.html>

Principles behind Good Soil

We know that small group ministry and fellowship has always been integral to the Methodist movement (classes, bands, bible studies, house groups, etc). Research shows that all growing churches have networks of small groups where Christians can meet together to deepen their faith.

We also know that these groups can easily stagnate or become 'full', unable to divide, leaving new groups hard to start because of a shortage of leaders. In addition to this, trustworthy or suitable resources for small groups can be difficult to find, and group leaders tend to be limited – often relying on theologically-trained people like ministers or local preachers. *Good Soil* tries to encourage new leaders to step up, feeling equipped and supported. The aim is to ensure a growing network of small groups, with material that can be used in homes, churches, residential homes, existing fellowship groups, or anywhere.

Good Soil is based on the Parable of the Sower, where Jesus points us to the good soil as a place for fruitful growth. The 'Good Soil' principle is about making sure our churches are places where Christians (or not-yet-Christians) can find support, regular prayer, fellowship and Bible study. We believe that with guided and structured notes, any Christian has the potential to lead a small group, supported by those around them.

We want to encourage a wide variety of people to feel encouraged and resourced to lead or facilitate groups, or host them at their home with another person leading. Hosting a good soil group can also provide a new purpose for members who have space to offer, but might not feel like leading. Indeed, it often works best if host and leader/facilitator can be different people with different gifts.

Good Soil is based upon listening to one another, praying and worshipping together, talking honestly about difficult passages or topics, without necessarily a need for 'answers'. This is not about being doctrinally or theologically correct, but about learning from one another in a community of grace and prayer. It does not necessarily even need a group. It could be used as a devotional resource for individuals or couples at home.

More information for ministers and group leaders

FIRST OF ALL, please do discuss with your minister or lay worker if you would like to start up a 'Good Soil' group. All new groups in the church should have the approval of the minister and church council (unless the material is simply being used for devotional time individually or in a family group).

We hope that the small groups created, with the material provided, will be used by God to make our churches into places of 'good soil' (alongside Sunday worship and good pastoral care, and our service and outreach into the community). In these groups, people will learn and grow together in the faith, support one another, pray for one another, feel included, and feel able to talk more about God and faith-related things.

We take our inspiration from the early church who "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" (Acts 2:42). These four simple things form the backbone of the church today, and will be very important in each group. In each session, we hope that you will in some way touch upon all four of these.

The apostles' teaching: this is the words of the New Testament (and of course we will do some Old Testament as well). Gathering around the scriptures is central to our growth as Christians and disciples. With the '*Good Soil*' material, the emphasis is not on 'right doctrine' or 'expert knowledge' but rather on learning from one another, with guided questions and notes to help. Leaders, *don't be afraid to admit you don't know the answer* – this can often be a great comfort to others!

Fellowship: getting to know one another, sharing stories, caring for one another, making friends, laughing and crying together, offering support and help when needed, learning to value and respect one another. This is all part of our fellowship.

The breaking of the bread: Although sharing Holy Communion is not expected as a normal part of these groups (saving that instead for our worship together),

participants will be 'breaking bread' of sorts as they eat and drink together as part of the hospitality provided. This will be an important part of building the group.

The prayers: praying together is essential for a small group. Leaders, please make sure you leave enough time for this! Prayer should always be approached in a non-intimidating way, with no one feeling under pressure to pray out loud, but rather a group will develop its own style of prayer as you go along. The *Good Soil* material offered will be designed to help you explore different types of prayer, and to resource you with some prayers or psalms to use. Remember that different people have different spiritualities – different ways of engaging with God.

It is not important to cover every point or question given in the material, but if a session at least does a little of each of the four things above, then it's a successful one!

Guidelines for HOSTING

If you are hosting a group at your home, or somewhere else, **we know you will be friendly and welcoming!** But here are some other things to consider:

Access: Where will people park? Do they know where the house is? Do any of your group members have disabilities? What will they need to make it easier for them? Do any have sight or hearing problems that the group leader needs to be aware of? Any other special needs?

Food and Drink: Refreshments are an important part of the fellowship. Starting with hot drinks and biscuits (or cake) could help people to relax. Group members might want to take it in turns to bring cakes or biscuits, especially if it is in the same home every time. Please find out if any of your group members have any **dietary requirements**, allergies, or special requests for drinks (e.g. decaffeinated, fruit teas, etc).

Comfort: Is the room warm enough? Is the room arranged to enable good discussion and eye-contact? Have you got enough chairs, and maybe one or two of different heights (some people need a higher chair, for example)?

Time: You might like to give some thought to how long is given to the refreshments. The fellowship can continue in the discussions, and there will usually be a lot of material to get through. Please agree a start time and finish time with the group.

Guidelines for LEADING OR FACILITATING

The group leader's gift will be in facilitating the discussion and making sure the sessions run smoothly, are well-timed and the important elements are included. We prefer to call you '**facilitators**' rather than leaders. It is not necessary for the facilitators to be 'experts' or to have the answer to every question. It is important that

leaders/facilitators read through the *Good Soil* material before the session and do any necessary preparation (e.g. activities, use of music, etc.).

It is really important that facilitators feel able to move the discussion along, bring in time for prayer, and involve everyone in the conversation. You need to be aware if any of the participants are 'dominating' the discussions (and take care not to dominate yourself!). It's also important that no one feels under pressure to read, speak or pray. So, volunteers should be sought with gentle encouragement!

It will usually be the leader's responsibility for raising any safeguarding concerns with the minister or safeguarding officers (**see note on Safeguarding below***).

If the technology or printing of materials is a problem to you, there are sure to be others in your church who can help. Ask and it shall be given unto you!

It is the leader's responsibility to contact the group to advise on any changes to dates or meeting times, and you might like to follow up with any members who have been missing for whatever reason.

You should obtain a list of your group and their phone numbers, but please ensure people are happy to give you these details, and keep them confidential.

From time-to-time, changes to groups may be necessary and people might switch groups. This should be managed in discussion with the minister, pastoral secretary, or if someone is appointed to co-ordinate groups.

SIZE OF GROUPS

Please do not worry if you start off with a 'small' group! We estimate that 4-6 people is ideal to start off with. It allows each member of the group space to express themselves, is not too intimidating, and leaves room to grow, especially if people feel inclined to invite friends. Remember, a 'full' group has no room to grow! (It is better to have 8 groups half-full with room to grow than 4 groups full up!)

TIMES & DATES

We recommend that 'Good Soil' groups work best fortnightly. It is designed to last about 90 minutes, and not longer than 2 hours. There will be material produced on this basis, with gaps during the usual holiday periods. Once a group is established, the dates and times you meet can be agreed among the group. You may need to make changes to your regular pattern. Just make sure that everyone is kept informed of the changes.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE GROUP

In your first session, or whenever the group has new people, it will be good to ask people what their expectations are. Together, work out some shared values, and especially talk about how we will keep the private things people share in confidence and prayer, with the exceptions below (**see note on Safeguarding***)

CONFIDENTIALITY & SAFEGUARDING

People should feel confident that what they share in the group will not be ‘gossiped’ or shared outside of the confines of the group, or ‘reported back’ to the minister! This is particularly important where people share personal information, past experiences, or things they struggle with. Your minister or pastoral leader will be very keen to hear how the groups are going, and help to iron out any teething problems, but please don’t share personal information, unless you have asked permission of that person to share it. Likewise, with prayer requests outside the group – always seek permission to share.

****IMPORTANT NOTE ON SAFEGUARDING:***

The only exception (and very important) is on the very rare occasions where information is shared or behaviour exhibited that makes you feel *uncomfortable* as a leader or host. You might need to talk it through with someone if it is disturbing (please talk to your minister or safeguarding officer, who will treat the matter confidentially and responsibly). You may feel that something has been disclosed which is potentially illegal puts someone at risk. If that is the case, ***never keep it to yourself*** but tell the appropriate people. **For any safeguarding concerns** (no matter how small or insignificant you think they might be) please contact the minister, or the church or circuit safeguarding officers. They are trained to appropriately deal with such things. Please note that safeguarding is not only about protection of children, but also vulnerable adults.

Bullying or discrimination of any kind should also not be tolerated. Please report this to your minister or circuit complaints officer.

It should always be emphasised that the **confidentiality** of the group does *not* mean complete secrecy in all matters, but that some matters may need to be explored further with appropriate officers, if the person or others may be at risk. Confidentially does mean that the issue will not be shared with anyone who does not need to know.

USING THE MATERIAL

The *Good Soil* material is designed with the following principles in mind:

- to be as flexible and user-friendly as possible;
- to offer ways of reflecting for people with differing learning styles;
- to enable people to learn from one another, with the help of God’s Spirit;
- to be adaptable for use in groups of any size, or by individuals;
- to help us all grow as Christians by engaging with the scriptures, being in fellowship and supporting one another in prayer.

Please bear in mind that the different members of your group will each find certain ways of learning and engaging work better for them than others. Please try to vary the approaches you use, and remember you don’t have to use everything suggested.

Please do not worry if you do not cover everything or ask every question. You probably won't! Using **Acts 2:42**, you might like to think about your session in these four areas:

Breaking bread: Refreshments and chatting;

Apostles' Teaching: Reflecting on the Scriptures using a variety of means;

Fellowship: Discussing and thinking about the issues, learning from each other;

Prayers: Praying and worshipping together in a variety of styles.

There is also the need for **personal preparation**, and making sure that difficult themes are introduced sensitively. On occasions you might need to advise group members beforehand to bring something with them!

The **material can be adapted to meet your needs**. You can read it out as it is, or feel free to use your own words. Members might like to have a copy of the material as well, but this is not essential.

Any **written prayers** given are there as a help to the leaders. They can also be read out loud together. You don't have to use them if you want to use your own words. More prayers are available on the website as a resource.

The '**Digging Deeper**' notes are designed to help you think more widely about the Bible passage, offering a bit of background or some helpful pointers to guide the discussion.

The '**Finding our Roots**' questions are NOT meant to provoke a long discussion but to get each member thinking about how they approach the issue. For this section, you might like to encourage them to share thoughts in pairs, for 5 minutes or so.

Any **additional material** could be used as 'homework' or a suggestion for personal devotions at home. There usually won't be time to explore them in the group.

Songs or hymns are not included in the new material but there are resources on the website of possible songs to add music and worship to the sessions.

Finally, we always value feedback, and are always happy to answer any questions you might have.

We pray that *Good Soil* may be a blessing for your church, promoting growth and nurture in the Christian faith, for the glory of God.

Andy Murphy and Mel Wheeler.