



Small Group Meals



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Small groups have been part of the SHACK life for many years and they take on many profiles. Community@5 groups generally meet one evening in the week and it's usually at the end of a busy day when the need to get home, throw together a meal and race out the door again isn't the most appealing thought. For this reason, incorporating a meal into the Small Group program can be of great benefit. Then only one person gets to stress about a meal – not the whole group!!

Needless to say, there are more pious reasons for eating together on small group night. Sharing a meal together enhances group dynamics, cohesion and even attendance to the group. The dinner conversation can be an informal time of getting to know each other; a time for exchanging news and a time of following up on prayer points raised the previous week. When issues are chatted about less formally, it can be easier to raise them for prayer later in the evening. Some people will find it easier to talk and share over dinner than in the 'formality' of the group session later. Also having dinner waiting can make getting to the group a really for the person who has to work late.

Providing a meal for 10 each week will evoke many responses from people. To some it will be a daunting task. They'd rather volunteer to lead a 6-week Bible study from the book of Numbers than think about gathering together ingredients for a simple meal. Those people probably have the gift of teaching and not the gift of hospitality! Some, on the other hand, will relish the thought and their minds will be on the job days ahead of small group night, getting excited about the possibilities of how they can turn the eclectic collection of ingredients in the bottom of the fridge and the top of the cupboard into a gourmet feast. These people probably do have the gift of hospitality! Everyone else in the group will fall somewhere between these responses.

The aim of this booklet is to give a few ideas on how to make the possibility of incorporating a meal into your Small Group meeting a reality, and to offer just a few of our tried and tested recipes used time and time again, and probably more often than that! Lets face it, pasta and rice will feature many times throughout the year!



SOUP

Hearty homemade soups in the dead of winter, served with wholesome bread is as good a meal as any. Beware transporting the soup! You will need good sealable containers. Soups can satisfy both vegetarians and gluten-free diets. Great soup ideas: Minestrone, Pumpkin, Potato and Leek and Shank and vegetable.

ARMENIAN LENTIL SOUP

In a large saucepan heat 4 tbs oil and fry 2 large onions (finely chopped) and 2 cloves garlic (crushed) until soft.

Add 1 tbs ground cumin and 4 cups of red lentils and continue to fry until aromatic.

Add 1 litre/ 4 cups vegetable or chicken stock and bring to boil.

Add 1 x 800g tin chopped tomatoes

Simmer on low until lentils soft. More stock may need to be added to keep soup "liquidy".

Puree.

Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Add juice of 1 lemon.

Garnish with parsley and serve with crusty bread.

NB: this soup can also be made with yellow split peas

HOMEMADE PIZZA

Use commercial pizza bases and top with your favorites.

Topping suggestions:

- Pesto, fresh spinach leaves and roasted vegetables and bocconcini
- Caramelized onions, fresh tomatoes, feta and basil
- Tomato paste, anchovies, black olives and lots of parmesan cheese
- Salami, capsicum, cheese, basil, pineapples and parsley



QUICHE OR SAVOURY SLICE AND SALAD

Quiche, zucchini slice or frittata is also a simple meal idea for a large group as this can be prepared ahead of time and easily transported – served with a green salad makes a fantastic meal!

ASPARAGUS AND ARBORIO RICE QUICHE

Line large lasagna dish with pastry (homemade, frozen shortcrust or 8-10 sheets of filo). Pre-cook the homemade or shortcrust pastry for 15 minutes @ 190. Filo does not require pre cooking.

Blanch 3 bunches of asparagus for 1-2 mins – refresh in ice water

Cook 150g Arborio rice in boiling water for 8 minutes – drain.

Heat 3 tbs olive oil in small pan – fry 2 medium onions (finely chopped) until soft, add 2 cloves of crushed garlic and cook 2 minutes. Cool slightly.

Place in bowl with cooked rice, 100g parmesan cheese, 100g cheddar cheese (grated), 6 eggs (lightly beaten), 1 cup cream, ½ cup chopped parsley and 2 tsp lemon rind.

Pour into tart shell.

Lay asparagus across dish and trim to fit.

Bake at 180 for 20-25 mins until filling set and slightly golden.

Serve with a simple green salad.

NB: this recipe should wait until asparagus is in season!

BOK CHOY SALAD

Wash and shred 2 bok choy. To make dressing combine ½ cup castor sugar, ¼ cup white vinegar, 1 tbs soy sauce, ½ cup olive oil and 2 tsps sesame oil in an airtight container or jar and shake well until sugar is dissolved. Combine bok choy, 6 shallots (spring onions) chopped, 100g roasted pinenuts or almonds with the dressing. Just before serving add Chang's Fried Noodles.

POTATOES

If someone is able to get there early enough to throw potatoes in the oven, a few 'toppings' to put over them makes a good easy meal. Potatoes usually take 45 mins in the oven, however, to speed up the process put metal skewers through the potatoes or par-cook in microwave before finishing in a hot oven.



Keep It Simple

You are aiming to provide a meal to your co-members, not an impressive dinner party. It is not a competition as to who is the best or most extravagant cook in town - try and make it an economical and nutritious meal. A meal which can be served in a bowl and eaten with either a spoon or a fork means you don't have to sit to a table and generally there are less dishes – pure convenience.

It is important that the meal doesn't become the focus of the evening, but rather, an integral part of your time together, which like the study or prayer time aims to enhance our lives of faith. The meal should be simple and only one course, unless you are having a special occasion when you can go for broke, bring out your best, place a few candles on the table for atmosphere, add a bottle of wine or two and linger over dinner – structuring your evening around the meal.

If you are rostered to cook, it may be an idea to pick something you can make the night before, at your leisure, which transports easily (NOT something very liquid - think about your containers for carrying in advance!). A meal which reheats simply and quickly, preferably on a stovetop or in the microwave, makes for quick preparation on the night. Don't forget to take any cooking utensils your hosts may not have, which are essential to the meal preparation (e.g. a wok).

Grace

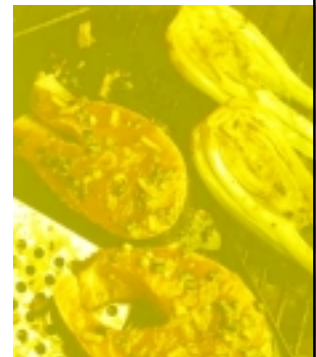
Remember to give thanks, or say "grace" before the meal. Acknowledging the source of our plentiful and varied sustenance is a good habit to develop.

Watch the Clock

Stick to a time frame. It can be very tempting to sit around the table nattering away for hours, literally eating away your limited time together. Start on time at 7.30pm (don't wait for everyone to arrive, they will come as soon as they can) and have the meal finished and table cleared by 8pm. If you don't happen to have a dishwasher of the automatic variety, incorporate dish washing into the roster and leave that task until the end of the evening. Take your tea and coffee on into the study, if you want to have it straight after dinner, don't spend too much time drinking it at the table at the end of dinner and delaying the study.

Plan Ahead

Develop a roster so that everyone knows in advance when it is their turn – and remind people from week to week so there are no surprises. Utilise peoples' gifts. Those who love to cook and revel in providing gastronomically for the group often won't mind being on the roster more often...and perhaps forego the leading of a study (if your group works on that basis).





VEGETABLE AND BACON VERMICELLI

Place 1-2 packet rice vermicelli noodles in large bowl of boiling water. Leave to soak until tender, drain. Fry 2 onions (finely chopped) until soft in large wok or very large saucepan. Add 6 - 8 rashers of chopped bacon and fry for 3-4 minutes. Add ½ a celery stick (chopped) and cook for 5 minutes. Add 2 red sliced capsicum, 5 sliced zucchini, cook until tender. Add 2 carrots (grated) and cook for 2 minutes. Add 2 tins of corn kernels and heat through. Add the cooked noodles to the vegetable combination, toss through with added soy sauce to taste.

LEMON BROCCOLI RISOTTO

Zest and juice 2 lemons – reserving 2 tbs of juice.

Place 1.3 cups water and 6 tsp vegetable stock powder into a large saucepan and bring to boil over high heat. Stir in 900g broccoli – cut into small florets – Blanch and remove.

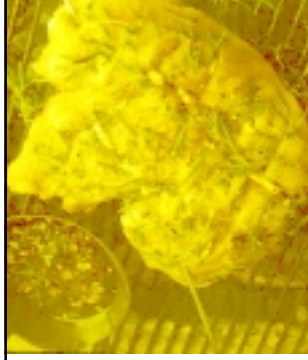
Heat 120ml olive oil and 40 g butter in a large, heavy based saucepan.

Add 16 green shallots / spring onions – trimmed and finely chopped and 4 garlic cloves – crushed. Cook for 2 mins. Add 880g arborio rice and stir well until rice coated in oil mix.

Add 120ml dry white wine, stirring until liquid absorbed. Add ¼ simmering stock to rice, stirring until absorbed. Repeat until all stock used. Finally add broccoli florets and stir through. This should take about 30 minutes. Remove risotto from heat – add ½ cup finely chopped parsley, the lemon juice and zest, and 3 tbs parmesan. Season with salt & pepper, serve with a sprinkle of grated parmesan.

COUSCOUS WITH VEGETABLES

Peel and chop a mixture of vegetables including 4 medium sized carrots, 4 turnips, 2 red capsicums, 4 zucchinis, 6 tomatoes (+/- sweet potato, eggplant, green beans etc) into bite size pieces. Place all vegetables in a large saucepan, cover with water and bring to the boil. Add 5 tbs tom paste, 2 tsp chilli paste, 4 tsp ground cumin seed, 2 cloves garlic (crushed). Cook for 10 minutes. Add 2 x 400g tin chick peas (drained) and 1 bunch silver beet, washed and chopped (or 1 packet of frozen spinach – prepared according to instructions on pack). Cook 10 mins. Prepare 600g Couscous according to instructions on box – or cover with equal volumes of boiling water and allow to absorb. Add 2 tbs olive oil and fork through to loosen grains. To serve, place spoon of couscous in bowl and top with vegetable mix. Garnish with sprig of fresh coriander.



If the rostered person is unable to cook on the night (e.g. due to a last minute work crisis), or perhaps even come on the night, they (or the group, depending what is appropriate) can fund the odd pizza or other takeaway food night. Or the group leaders could have some cans of soup set aside for just such an occasion, and a last minute phone call could ask someone to bring a hearty loaf or two of bread and some cheese. Voila!

Logistics

It may be worth considering investing in a rice cooker if no one in your group has one to share and also a large saucepan for those larger quantities of pasta. Not everyone has crockery, cutlery, glasses and cups for 10+ people! Check your host's provisions before the first dinner, and if others can't donate a few bits and pieces, consider all chipping in and buying a cheap pasta bowl and cutlery set from Ikea or Target.

The cost of providing a meal may be difficult for some and Small Group leaders need to be sensitive to group members means. There are practical ways of circumventing embarrassment by providing a kitty in advance, or like the Sunday evening meal, people can agree to chipping in \$3 each evening to cover the cost of the meal. You may also consider an agreement for covering the costs of tea and coffee, alternatively, roster people to provide supper.

Special Dietary Needs

Many people have special dietary requirements and it's important to respect these and incorporate them into meal planning as simply as possible. Apart from the obvious decaff/skinny-soy latte; don't forget vegetarian and gluten-free diets.

Vegetarians

Trying to cater for both meat eaters and vegetarians on the same evening is unrealistic. Just go for the vegetarian option – it will also keep the cost of the meal down. Some vegetarians will eat fish or chicken or cheese or eggs. Some won't! Check with the individual before making any preparations for your meal.

Gluten-free diets

Gluten is a type of protein that is naturally found in grains such as wheat, rye, barley and oats. These form the basis of many flours, breads, pasta, biscuits, cakes and pastry. Even cornflour is often made from wheat rather than corn. Many processed foods contain small amounts of wheat flour, often as a thickener in sauces, soups, puddings, mayonnaise and even salad dressings. It's important to read the labels. Gluten free products are available in supermarkets. Gluten-free foods include: fruits and vegetables; nuts and seeds; legumes (such as lentils, chickpeas and yellow split peas); rice, rice noodles, rice cakes and rice crackers; corn (such as Taco shells and corn chips); maize meal or polenta, Millet and buckwheat (not actually a cereal); and Arrowroot (used as a thickener).

THAI VEGETABLE CURRY

Gently heat 4 tbs vegetable oil in a large heavy based saucepan

Fry 2 onions (finely chopped), with 2 chopped lemon grass stalks and 2 tbs coriander root for several minutes. Both these ingredients are available in convenient little glass jars (eg John West for ease of preparation).

Add 2 tbs red or green curry paste (also available in jars) and cook until aromatic.

Add all other ingredients (2 tins coconut milk, 4 cups water, 2 tbs fish sauce, 2 tbs sugar and juice of 2 lemons).

Cook for 10 mins.

Add chopped vegetables (a mixture of seasonal veg which may be based on sweet potato and include red capsicums, green beans, carrots, broccoli, etc. You will require approx ¾ - 1 cup per person)

Cook until very tender, approx 45mins.

Serve with rice and lots of fresh coriander to garnish

(This curry sauce can for the base for a chicken curry – just add fresh, diced chicken thighs 30 mins before serving – about ½ thigh per person if adding to vegetables).

CHILI CON CARNE

Finely dice 2 large onions and fry in 4 tbs oil in heavy based saucepan together with 4 tabs finely chopped stems of fresh coriander, 2 cloves garlic – crushed, and 2-4 small chillies - finely chopped (or 2 small tsp chilli from a jar!)

Fry gently for 5 mins then transfer to a plate.

Brown 700g mince steak in saucepan – add onion mix.

Add 2 x 800g tins chopped tomatoes and 1 x 800g (large) tin red kidney beans – rinsed and drained. Cook for 30 mins then add 2 red capsicums – diced. Cook further 30 mins before testing for salt and pepper.

Serve on bed of rice with dollop of sour cream and fresh coriander leaves.

NB. This can also be served with tacos or tortillas.

VEGETABLE STIR FRY WITH RICE NOODLES

A vegetable stir-fry and rice noodles is easy to prepare: you can chop it all up the night before, and then just toss it in the pan / wok when you get there. Allow 1 cup vegetables per person – cut up finely so cooking time will be brief. Add a simple flavouring such as light soy sauce. Rice noodles just need boiling water added.



Meal Suggestions

PASTA

Pasta with sauce is always a winner, however, it's a meal that has to be assembled at the last minute, and served immediately to taste good.....added incentive for members to be on time! Lasagna on the other hand, is great as it can be made ahead of time and freezes well. Regular pasta is a good base for both vegetarian and non-vegie meals but is not okay for a gluten free diet. Gluten free pasta is available from health food shops or some of the larger supermarkets. When cooking pasta, remember that it needs plenty of boiling water – so an extra large saucepan will be very handy. Check out op shops for an old boiler – it doesn't need to be an expensive heavy based saucepan.

To be more time efficient, see if your SG hosts will boil the water and get the pasta cooking prior to everyone arriving at 7.30. Then the person on cooking duty only needs to arrive with a heated sauce or in time to heat it before it's time to serve.

Guidelines on quantities: when cooking for more than 2-3, a good rule of thumb is 100g of uncooked pasta per person.

Everyone has their favorite pasta sauce recipes, so we wont include too many.

SIMPLE TOMATO SAUCE AND PASTA

(A very easy and quick meal when time is short)

Cook 1kg short pasta – Penne, Rigatoni or Fusilli as directed.

While the pasta is cooking.....

Heat 1 bottle of fresh tomato sauce (or puree an 880g tin of tomatoes). If time permits, fry 1 large onion with 2 cloves of crushed garlic in 4 tbs olive oil and add to the sauce.

Stir the heated sauce through the drained pasta.

Sprinkle with parmesan cheese and top with a bit of chopped parsley if you have it handy.

Serve with lots of crusty bread.

This meal will cost approximately \$6.

NB. Add 5-6 slices bacon or ham (chopped and cooked with the onion) and 4 tbs sweet chilli sauce to make a very quick Matriciana.





GNOCCHI WITH SPINACH AND SUN-DRIED TOMATOES

Gently fry 2 medium onions in 4 tbs olive oil

Thinly slice 500g mushrooms and add to onion

Add 2 pkts frozen spinach – prepared as per instructions on back of packet

Stir in 300ml of cream and a small container of semi-dried tomatoes (about 200g) – heat gently.

Prepare 3-4 pkts of vacuum sealed gnocchi (1.5kg) as per instructions and combine with sauce.

Serve with crusty bread.

NB: Gnocchi doesn't look as plentiful as similar weights of pasta but is very filling.

This meal should cost less than \$15.00

RISE AND COUSCOUS

Rice makes a fantastic base for many dishes, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals;

and it is great for those on a gluten-free diet. Rice can be served with a number of

„sauces“ including Satay Sauce (eg. Taylor's Thai Satay Sauce) with chicken or vegetables,

Thai Green Curry or Chili Con Carne.

As a rule, you should allow 50g uncooked rice per person or if using a rice cooker 1 of the

small cups included with the cooker per person. A rice cooker will prove invaluable if you

can manage to get a hold of one or all chip in for one to become a group commodity (as

long as someone has space to store it). Ask your SG host to start the rice cooking in

advance – rice cookers keep rice warm for any length of time – for efficient preparation.

However, don't expect them to have rice in the cupboard without due warning.

Couscous, or cracked wheat, is not suitable for gluten-free diets but is a tasty alternative to rice and pasta - 1 cup of uncooked couscous will be plenty for 2 people.

CHICKEN AND VEGETABLE CURRY

Cook 3 chicken fillets (sliced) until lightly browned, and just cooked – set aside. Fry 2 onions

(finely chopped) until soft in large wok or very large saucepan. Add 5 large potatoes (diced)

and cook until it begins to look transparent. Add 4 sticks of celery (chopped) and 3 large

carrots (finely sliced) and cook, covered, for approx 5 minutes. Add 4 zucchini (sliced) and 1

another 5 minutes. Add 7-8 tbs Curry Paste and 2

large red capsicum (sliced), cook, covered for

x 400 ml coconut milk, cook until all veggies are

tender. (Add chicken until heated through. It's

important to add the chicken at the end so that it

remains tender). Serve with rice.



SPAGHETTI WITH TUNA

1kg spaghetti – cooked and drained.

While the spaghetti is cooking.....

Heat 6 tbs olive oil; add 2 cloves of garlic (crushed), 4 tbs finely chopped parsley and 2 small

chilli peppers (finely chopped – or ½ tsp crushed chilli from a jar) – cook gently for 2 mins.

Add 4 anchovy fillets - break up with a wooden spoon, then add 1 large tin of tuna in oil

(drained). Cook gently until heated through – add ground black pepper if needed.

Stir the sauce through the pasta adding a little of the cooking water if the dish is too dry.

NB: Semi dried tomatoes, olives and lemon zest can also be added for a bit of pizzazz.

FETTUCINE WITH SMOKED TROUT

1 kg fettuccine – cooked and drained.

While the pasta is cooking.....

Heat 2-3 tbs olive oil in a heavy based frypan and add 5 anchovy fillets (optional) – breaking up

with a wooden spoon.

Roughly chop 5 large tomatoes and add to pan along with 2 tbs capers (rinsed and drained) and

5 tbs chopped basil or dill or a mixture..... or even parsley if that's all you have.

Peel the flesh from 2 medium sized smoked trout (available at the deli section of a supermarket

or at Vic Market) being careful to remove the larger bones. This leaves your hands smelling

very fishy! Add the meat to the pan and heat well but don't cook.

Gently stir the sauce through the cooked pasta and serve immediately.

This meal will cost less than \$20 (\$2 per person).

NB: 880g tin of chopped tomato can be substituted for the fresh tomatoes.

RIGATONI WITH BROCCOLI AND NUTS

1kg rigatoni or penne cooked and drained.

While the pasta is cooking.....

Toast 4 tbs pine nuts (or silvered almonds) in a warm oven or in a dry frypan – careful not to

burn, and put aside.

Heat 4 tbs olive oil in large frypan or heavy based saucepan and add 2 medium sized onions

(finely chopped) – cooking until soft.

Add 6 anchovy fillets (optional) and mash to a paste as they heat.

Add 880g tin chopped toms, pinch salt and ground black pepper.

Simmer a few minutes. Add 2 whole heads of broccoli, which have

been cut into small florets and cooked for 3 mins in the pasta water

(before the pasta is added – otherwise they're too tricky to fish out!).

Cover and cook very gently, mixing well. Add toasted nuts and mix

through the cooked pasta. Sprinkle with grated parmesan.