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Courtesy Antoinette Napier

▲ Antoinette Napier's (left, middle) first Grow Group, in summer 2016, shared fruit baskets with members of the community.

Pioneer Memorial Church (PMC) Grow Groups are a small group ministry developed to help group members make new connections, share interests and receive spiritual support. The groups are available to PMC members, Andrews University students and those in the Berrien Springs community. This semester PMC launched 41 groups.

Grow Groups meet for 8 to 12 weeks and consist of 8 to 15 people. Each group is interest-based and includes a spiritual component, whether it be Bible study or prayer. Rodlie Ortiz, associate pastor at PMC who coordinates the Grow Groups program, says this set-up allows people from across the spectrum of faith to participate. "Someone that is not into God or church yet can feel comfortable going to a running group," he says. "By being around other Christians in the group, they will be exposed to God's presence and influence."

Each group also participates in a service project and a social event outside of their

regular meeting time. To encourage student involvement, Andrews University students are encouraged to participate as group leaders.

Antoinette Napier, working toward her M.A. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, initially became involved in Grow Groups as a way to meet her academic program's service requirement. In 2016, she led her first group and then continued to lead, including groups on Healing from Broken Relationships, Discovering Me and, this semester, Attachment Style and God Struggles. She says a typical Grow Group session involves a presentation of the topic followed by group discussion. Participants share prayer requests, exchange stories and read books. The aim of these activities is to build up and encourage one another.

Antoinette has felt affirmed in her life purpose and has benefited from the sense of community which Grow Groups provided. "It creates support and we feel free to lean

on each other," she says. "It also strengthens us to extend support to others that may not be a part of our group because of the sense of security established."

Noelle Koliadko, sophomore Mathematics major, co-leads a Grow Group with her brother, Noah Koliadko, sophomore Engineering/Computer Engineering and Physics major. The group studies the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, line by line, and often creates diagrams to visualize the concepts they learn about. Occasionally, volunteers from the group will teach a portion of the chapter the group is studying, too. "Teaching has helped me identify myself as part of the Andrews community, as I was actively involved in some activities rather than just attending classes," says Noelle.

She adds, "Many of our friends we met the first week of school attended our Grow Group. We became a lot closer while studying the Bible together — I consider them to be some of my closest college friends."

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Grow Groups utilized the online platform Zoom. While some groups have begun to meet again in person, they practice social distancing and use face coverings. "Making friends and sharing together on a topic you're passionate about is very important, especially during these times of COVID," says Rodlie Ortiz. "Community is indispensable. However, the primary goal is that of discipleship and helping someone grow in their walk with God." ■

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