

STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE OF LIFE GROUPS

We believe spiritual growth happens best in the context of biblical community. Life Groups are small communities gathering regularly to share life together and apply God's word to our everyday situations. Our hope is that each part of the church family will be involved in a Life Group. In a group, you can be known, loved, cared for, encouraged and challenged. We trust our Life Groups will welcome new members from within and visitors from outside our church family. Our ultimate goal is to build and strengthen relationships with each other and grow closer to God, glorifying him through our study and ministry service.

HOW TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

1. **GOSPEL:** Groups should study the gospel and grow deeper in their understanding of Christ. Groups should engage one another in meaningful discussion and reflection.
2. **SAFETY:** Groups should be a refreshing environment where grace is extended to all. Groups should be a place where members can be fully known, be willing to be vulnerable and go outside of their comfort zone while trusting that they are safe.
3. **TIME:** Groups should commit to a regular time to meet and all members should be encouraged to attend.
4. **HOSPITALITY:** All visitors should feel welcome and invited back.
5. **OWNERSHIP AND FACILITATION:** Group leaders should delegate tasks and equip members to take a more active role in the meeting. Group leaders or the delegated member should facilitate discussion so that no one dominates the meeting and all members participate.

CARE STRUCTURE FOR LIFE GROUPS

Elders/Ministers —————> Congregational Care Minister (Tina Wharton) —————> Life Group Ministry
 Leaders (Lindsay Perkins and Don Shaw) —————> Life Group Leaders —————> Church Members

1. Our goal is to have a centralized way for church members to have their needs communicated to the right ministers and/or elders, by way of their Life Group Leader.
2. Additionally, leaders will have support on multiple levels by way of the Congregational Care Minister and Life Group Ministry leaders.

LIFE GROUP LEADER GOALS

1. **ORGANIZATION:** Group leaders are encouraged to decide on a regular meeting time and communicate that with group members. Group leaders should either organize or delegate organization of meeting locations, studies, meals (if applicable), ministry events, and fellowship activities.
2. **FACILITATION:** Group leaders should facilitate discussion or delegate a discussion leader.
3. **MAINTAINING THE DATABASE:** Group leaders are asked to keep the Life Group Ministry leaders apprised of any changes in their group membership or meeting time so that the website can be updated, please do this via emailing alive@nscoc.org. Additionally, they will maintain their group's information in the Elexio software.
 - a. The Northside website will soon have a page for the Life Group ministry and a list of all the groups, their demographic or geographic parameters, meeting times with general location, and encrypted contact information for the leaders so that visitors can inquire for more information. (No phone numbers, emails, or meeting addresses will be posted publicly on the website.)
4. **REPORTING:** Group leaders are encouraged to communicate the needs of their group members to the appropriate ministry, minister, or the elders.
 - a. For example, if one of your group members has surgery and needs a meal train, if you are personally unable to start their meal train, you would reach out to the meal ministry for assistance via Laura Zimmer at LJZimmer1@gmail.com.
 - b. For example, if a member of your group is needing financial assistance or assistance of another kind, you would reach out to the care ministry at care@nscoc.org.
 - c. For example, if a couple in your group has expressed that they need prayers and they are OK with the elders and ministers knowing, you would email that prayer request to elders@nscoc.org and ministers@nscoc.org along with a specification that the request should or should NOT be added to the public prayer list.
 - d. If a group member has a need that you are unsure how to address, feel free to email the Life Group Ministry leaders at alive@nscoc.org and we will find you the answer.
5. **ENCOURAGEMENT:** Group leaders should encourage their group members to keep regular attendance at meetings. Leaders should reach out to those who have been absent and check in with them. Leaders should encourage group visitors to come back, or to get plugged in another group, if their group is not the right fit.
6. **TRAINING:** Group leaders are asked to identify members of their group who show willingness or interest in leadership and encourage them to take a more active role in the group. Once the group has reached a critical capacity, there will be two (or more) leaders who are experienced and capable to multiply and lead their own new group.

4 CHALLENGES THAT KILL COMMUNITY

Excerpt from Bill Search, www.simplesmallgroups.com

Building communities within our church is hard work. It shouldn't be hard work, since God created us for community. But we live in a broken world that has altered and inhibited the relationships God created us to enjoy. For that reason, it's helpful for us to examine the different road blocks that often prevent communities from being formed, and that damage communities that used to be healthy.

In my experience, here are four of the biggest community killers that we as church leaders have to overcome.

1. THE CHALLENGE OF TIME

The first challenge to cultivating relationships is also the most valuable commodity in our western world today. People talk about this commodity in the U.S. like some people in the developing world talk about food or water. You know what it is, of course. It's time! We simply don't have enough time.

I was standing in the atrium of my church a year ago handing out cards about our small groups. A young couple came up to me and began to chat. They were newly married. When I asked if we could connect them with a group, they explained that they would like to do it down the road, but they were really busy right now. I almost laughed in their faces. I have three kids, a demanding job, and a home to maintain. Busy? They don't know anything about being busy. But it's a common song today, isn't it?

Do you know what most people are busy doing? In a typical week, people spend most of their time at work. The second biggest consumer of time is sleep. Both of those are necessary. However, do you know what the third most time-consuming activity is? Watching television.

According to the Nielsen Media service, the average American watches nearly five hours of TV a day. That's 35 hours a week and over 1,500 hours per year. Let me break that down another way. The average American watches 1.5 days of TV per week. That turns into 78 days per year—which is 1.6 months out of every year watching television! So, an average person who lives to be 70 will spend 5,460 days of their life watching TV. If you're not so good at math, that's 15 years. Fifteen years!

If churches and small groups are going to deal with this community killer, we must challenge people to really look at what is keeping them busy. Randy Frazee addressed the craze of the busy life in *Making Room for Life*. As developers of community, part of our mission will be to help people find the time they need to make relationships a priority.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF AVOIDANCE

The second challenge to cultivating relationships is what I would call avoidance. This happens in a relationship when you know you need to deal with some conflict or problem, but you just can't.

My first real job is a good example of this. Right out of college I served on staff with a man named Fred. Fred was a championship talker. You could mention any subject and he'd wax on about it for minutes that felt like hours. Fred had a thought about everything. Now, I'll be transparent for a minute here—I'm a talker, too. I come from a long line of talkers, ramblers, and conversation dominators. (But since I'm writing this and not Fred, I will say that Fred had my talkativeness beat hands down.) Anyway, Fred and I pretty much controlled all the words on our staff of eight people. This went on for months. Every staff meeting, every lunch was like a ping-pong match between Fred and me. Every now and then we'd take a breath and someone else would talk, but then we were back at it.

I didn't know this was a problem. (I was too busy talking). But after several months, our boss pulled me aside and asked, "Did you know that after meetings Sara goes back to her office and cries?" I couldn't understand why. Then my boss explained that Sara—who was a bright seminary graduate—couldn't get a word in edgewise thanks to Fred and me. For months our group had avoided the ugly truth that two talkers were killing the dynamic. But it took just one courageous guy to step up challenge us. I'm glad he did! Our group was dramatically better after that. If my boss had avoided the problem, our group would have continued to suffer. And I wouldn't have grown as a person and become more reflective about how I contribute in a group of people.

So this is a challenge to small-group leaders. Does a problem exist in your group that regularly damages the people, relationships, or interactions within it? If so, you've got to deal with it. Avoiding it will only make things worse.

3. THE CHALLENGE OF STRANGE PEOPLE

The third challenge to cultivating relationships is what we in pastoral circles are often tempted to call "weirdoes." Some call them ECR (extra care required) or EGR (extra grace required) people. Some gently refer to them as Emotional Black Holes. But to put things simply, they are strange. We don't want to give these people our email addresses or cell phone numbers, much less spend time in a group with them.

Most of us have a weirdo or two in our lives. Maybe it's End Times Larry, who sees the imminent return of Christ in every newspaper headline. Or it could be Needy Ned, who "just wants a special woman to share his life with." Maybe it's Steve the Bible Expert, who always knows more about the intricacies of the Bible than anyone else in the history of humanity. Or it could be Bill the amateur comedian (okay that's me). Some of us have the weirdo in our small group. And as the saying goes, if you can't identify the extra grace required person in your group, it's probably you!

I think John Ortberg said it best in his book *Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get to Know Them*. Ortberg writes that we all have an "as-is" tag. Like the seconds rack at the back of a department store, we are all slightly imperfect. We are all weird.

But you know what? Odd people have a lot to teach us. Jesus says that "When you [take care of] the least of these my brothers and sisters you were doing it for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's the

castaway people that often provide the best opportunity for us to learn to love. In fact, the more we love them, the more we love God.

John puts it this way: "If anyone says, 'I love God' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21). The strange people are a gift to your group. They are a gift from God. Part of our job and developers of community is to help everyone learn from the strange people in their groups. Yes, some unique people might not fit in a group. But most odd folks can be part of a group—if the group learns to love like Jesus loves.

4. THE CHALLENGE OF UNREAL EXPECTATIONS

The fourth challenge to cultivating relationships and building community is unreal expectations. Let's face it: we all have expectations—we just usually think ours are reasonable. But here are a few of the expectations often placed on small groups: intimacy, accountability, evangelism, deep fellowship, deep worship, emergency service personnel, and so on. Sometimes our church leadership expects a small group to take a person from unbeliever to missionary in two years—in a group that meets every other week and takes summers and holidays off!

But perhaps the biggest challenge is the expectation of intimacy. Let me ask you: how often have you tried to "sell" small groups based on intimacy? You know, you promised deep friendships; you told perspective members that if they joined a group, they would grow closer than a family. Does this happen often or rarely?

In his book, *The Search to Belong*, Joe Myers points out that human beings only need a few intimate relationships. We need lots of social and personal relationships, but intimacy isn't required to enjoy a relationship. In fact, intimacy can deter it. Imagine you're in a couples small group and one of the men shares that he really struggles with lust. He tells the couples circled around the coffee table how difficult it is not to look at women and take a sensual snap shot. That's an intimate level of sharing! But do you think that would help the group or harm it?

It's not that a small group shouldn't be intimate, but when people expect a certain level of intimacy they will usually get ticked off if the group stays on the surface. Some people expect their small group to be an intense Bible Study, for example—especially people who have a background in Bible-Study Fellowship. If you expect a typical small group to morph into an in-depth exploration of biblical texts, you will be disappointed. It's not that we want "shallow," it's that we can't agree what deep is!

In order to address these unreal expectations, it's important for a group to honestly talk about what each member hopes to experience in the group. And when a member voices an unreal expectation, it is more than okay for the leader to set expectations that are more reasonable.

One final thing concerning community killers in our small-group ministries: there are no barriers that can't be overcome with the help from God's Spirit and the willing hearts of group participants. So go out and knock some down.

RESOURCES FOR GROUP LEADERS

Our goal is to make it EASY to lead a Life Group! Please see the resources below to assist you with planning your study material.

1. **SERMON NOTES:** As of now, David Allen is posting sermon notes with some discussion questions and thoughts each week. These will be posted on the Google Document (accessible by the QR Code below) before Sunday of each week.
2. **REAP STUDY:** The “REAP” Method is an easy way to dive deep into a Bible passage and use the most of your “gospel time.” It is described below and can be used on any passage.
 - a. R | READ (Read the passage out loud together. Consider reading multiple translations depending on the length of the text.)
 - b. E | EXAMINE (What do you see? What does it mean? How do you interpret?)
 - c. A | APPLY (How does this change me/us? Is the Lord telling us something?)
 - d. P | PRAY (Finish your “gospel time” with prayer requests, discussion of needs, and prayer for each other)
3. **RIGHTNOW MEDIA:** All church members have access to RightNow Media, which has a vast database of study material along with video lessons. This is easy for those leaders who need the minimal amount of prep beforehand. If you haven't yet accessed your free account, sign up by texting NORTHSIDECOC to 49775, or visit: <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Account/Invite/NorthsideCOC>
4. **DAVID'S GOOGLE DOC:** David Allen has compiled a Google Document with a lot of great study material. Check back frequently as lessons are always being added. Access the Google Doc via the QR Code below by using your phone's camera. We hope to have this on our website soon.

