



COMMUNITY GROUP

Training Manual – Fall 2016

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Community Groups and Our Mission

Our Mission: Making disciples. Matthew 28:19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

But what does it mean to be a disciple? Our three core values help lay this out:

- 1. Jesus.** Being a disciple means following Jesus. Faith in Jesus and his salvation by grace leads to becoming a disciple of Jesus. This then begins a lifetime journey of learning to follow Jesus in every area of life and looking more and more like Jesus.
- 2. Family.** Jesus intends us not just to follow him alone but to follow him with a family. The family of Christ is where you learn how to live your new life as a disciple of Jesus, in the context of the church.
- 3. Mission.** Jesus commissions us to make disciples, which means telling others about Jesus and inviting them to follow Jesus.

How do Community Groups help us accomplish our mission? Here are a few key ways:

Natural Retention // Think of the church family as a house. This church family grows in two ways—it gets more people to come through the front door to join the family, and keeps people from slipping out the back door and leaving the family. Instead of only celebrating how many come in the front door we need to help measure how many stick around and join the church family. This concept is called “closing the back door”.

Natural Evangelism // Perhaps the most common form of natural evangelism is what is called “come and see evangelism”. It takes place whenever someone shares a spiritual need or interest and we respond by inviting him or her to come to a bible study, to attend a church service, or just to hang out with some of our Christian friends. It gives the person an opportunity to see Christianity and Christians up close and personal. Its low-threat. There’s seldom any pressure. It lets spiritual window-shoppers move toward Jesus at a Spirit-led pace. It’s completely natural, not forced. All you need to say when a friend or coworker expresses a spiritual interest or need is “Why don’t you just come and see?”

Natural Follow-Up // If most guests come as a result of a member of the church inviting them it is only natural for them to follow up with them. Simple questions such as “how do you like it? Any questions I can answer? Do you want to come again?”.

Natural Assimilation // Friends don’t have to be reminded to assimilate friends. They do so naturally—and enthusiastically.

How Community Groups Change Everything

Our small groups play an important role in shaping the culture of our church and here are a few key ways they do that:

The Holy Man Myth // Small groups help to take this myth away. It's the idea that pastors somehow have a more direct line to God. It cripples a church because it overburdens pastors and underutilizes the gifts and anointing of everyone else. It mistakenly equates leadership gifts with superior spirituality. The pastor cannot carry out all the pastoral roles and functions. He cannot be everywhere at once. As a result the small group leaders and members understand the need to step up and assume roles of spiritual leadership that they would have otherwise deferred to the pastoral staff.

The Holy Place Myth // This myth fosters a belief that there are some places God hangs out and lots of others he seldom frequents. When people in the small group begin to see God at work in the apartments, family rooms, etc., they start to realize that God is just as likely to answer their prayers in those places as he is at the church building.

Genuine Empowerment // Small groups create opportunities for significant ministry. Small groups open up lots of opportunities for frontline ministry. Small groups need a leader and a host. Often they are made up of two couples. This means in every group, we have four people who can have opportunities to lead, counsel, disciple, pray, visit the sick etc.

Honesty and Transparency // Just stand around any Sunday and listen to the people in your church greet one another. You'll hear numerous varieties of "What's up? How you doing?" Usually no matter how bad things are, you'll hear one predominant answer: "Fine!" Small groups can change that, because of their nature and structure, they naturally foster greater honesty and transparency. Their location, size, and makeup are much more conducive to authenticity than and sanctuary or Sunday school class can ever hope to be. Where would you be more likely to be open and honest? In a family room or a classroom? With twelve people or twenty-five people? For most of us the answers would be the small more intimate setting.

Spiritual Disciplines // Another advantage that small groups can bring is a marked increase in the practice of spiritual disciplines. The small group now takes good intentions and puts them on our calendar. Every church is full of people who feel they should do more when it comes to reading the Bible, prayer, fellowship and reaching out to meet the needs of others. But busy schedules, procrastination, and a lack of commitment all conspire to keep these things from happening. Small groups take these important spiritual disciplines and make them urgent by putting them on the schedule. Every time we meet we share, pray and study the bible together. We also begin to see how we can live on mission in our daily lives and as a group.

Family Discipleship // Another benefit is that the children are witnessed to as they see mom and dad make small groups a priority and mom and dad are helped by their commitment to this by growing in their personal relationship with Jesus and one another.

Community Group Basics

The Right Size // When it comes to small groups, size matters. If a group is too small, it has a hard time surviving. If it is too large, it has a tough time remaining intimate enough for sharing. A group needs to be small enough that everyone has a chance to contribute, but large enough that no one feels forced to speak up or share more than they want to. Recommended size between eight and no more than sixteen. If there are more singles in the group than a smaller size works if there are more marrieds in the group a larger group can work.

The Right Leaders // Each Community Group has a overall leader but we encourage each group to have more than one leadership person, or couple. After the leader we encourage each group to have a host that supports the family component of the group. We also encourage groups to identify a mission leader. Beyond this groups can assign out as many responsibilities as they see helpful. [Job descriptions for the CG leader and host are attached]

The Right Process // The path that turns strangers into a part of a spiritual family seems to follow this path:

Acquaintance > Friendship > Trust & Openness > Authenticity & Accountability

Research studies indicate that the amount of time a group spends together correlates directly to the level of personal appreciation for one another and overall sense of group cohesiveness. But this takes time so leaders shouldn't get discouraged when a group is at an earlier stage. Our small groups will help us to grow in many of these areas as we come together and follow Jesus and become his disciples and reach out to those around us that do not know him.

Community Groups Meeting Components

While the application of these will look different in each group, each group should regularly have the following elements present.

- **Jesus:** Growing to look like Jesus
 - Studying Scripture—Learning to read Scripture on your own and learning to apply it to life
 - Prayer—Learning to have a deep relationship with Jesus in communion and prayer
- **Family:** Shared life around Jesus
 - Relationship building—Helping people know others and be known
 - Care and discipleship—Caring for people, providing counsel, and encouragement
- **Mission:** Shared mission with Jesus
 - Support for individual mission—Finding out what missional opportunities members already have and encouraging them
 - Group mission—Working together when appropriate on missional opportunities

Sample Group Meetings

Group A

Regular rhythm: Weekly meal with a simple format

Meeting format:

- Family Meal (1hr)
 - Relationship building
 - Life updates
 - Missional updates and opportunities
- Scripture Study (30min)
- Prayer (15min)

Group B

Regular rhythm: Group meeting twice per month, one fellowship night per month and/or one missional opportunity per month

Meeting format:

- Snacks & Fellowship (30min)
- Scripture Study (1hr)

- Prayer & Missional Updates (30min)

Bible Study Format

For Fall 2016 each group has two options in terms of study. Each aims to follow the reading plan for the whole church to read through the gospel of John in Fall 2016.

- A general Bible study: See the attached handout on how to ask questions of the reading assigned for the week.
- Using the ESV Study notes study: Use some or all of the questions in the provided ESV Study notes Bible study.

Practical Application of Mission

In one sense everyone can easily agree that we should be living out the value of mission in our individual lives, and even that our community groups should serve and support this mission, but what does this look like practically? We encourage each group to prayerfully discuss this at least every year.

Here are a few questions to ask and directions to pursue:

- *What opportunities do your group members already have?:* Talk through workplaces and school activities and neighborhoods and hobbies. Where could people build relationships or talk to people about Jesus?
- *How can you serve and support them in their opportunities?:* Can you have them give updates about these things or can you pray with them about these things?
- *Are there any places where group members can work together on missional opportunities?:* If someone is seeking to reach out to their neighborhood could others help through cookouts? Could two people invite an unbelieving couple along to dinner and a movie? Could the group bless a school where a members is a teacher? Could the group go to a kid's soccer games or baseball games?
- *Could your group work together on a new missional opportunity that everyone is willing to create space for?:* In many ways this is the most difficult to do, but if there is a willingness the group could take on a new project (such as serving the homeless, a non-profit, etc.) as long as members are willing to create room in their schedules for the activity.

What if your group is struggling with getting started?

- *Get it on their radar through prayer and updates:* Create a category for this by often praying for unbelievers and by asking regularly what opportunities are there.

- *Start with a prayer walk:* Ask folks to walk an area and pray God would grow their hearts for this
- *Start with a “training wheel” missional opportunity:* Find a one-shot activity that will give folks a taste of mission and whet their appetite.
- *Partner up with another group:* Find a group with some opportunities and encourage your church to participate

Kids & Community Groups

What’s the best way to handle kids and community group? This is a question every group must answer for itself but here are a few guidelines to keep in mind.

Kids and Community Groups: The Benefit

Sometimes kids learn biblical concepts through specific age-appropriate instruction, other times they observe how these concepts are worked out. Seeing their parents live out the values of Jesus, Family, and Mission week to week in community group can help communicate these values even to young kids. This is why we encourage, when possible, to groups to find some meaningful connection between the kids in the group and the group itself. This will vary greatly from group to group but should start with a conviction that kids are not simply an interruption, but a blessing. However, this must also be balanced against having a reasonable ability in the group to focus on the task at hand. We encourage groups to bring up, discuss, and decide this issue at least yearly and to look to their group coach for help when necessary.

Kids and Community Groups: The Responsibility

We must make clear though that the church itself cannot coordinate childcare across groups because of the difficulty of implementing consistent policies in a uniform way. Ultimately, parents must decide what is best for their family and make sure childcare arrangements are handled in a satisfactory way and that they feel comfortable and safe. We encourage each group to practice good child safety for the protection of their kids.

Kids and Community Groups: The Practicals

Here are several options to consider in the regular meeting:

- *Parents Provide Own Childcare:* Some groups may opt to have each member individually arrange for childcare on group meeting nights. This may be necessary depending on where the group meets and whether it can safely accommodate children.

- *Full Group Involvement:* Groups may allow kids to be part of as much of the group as possible, and take this into account when structuring the meeting. This may mean a longer family/community time and a shorter study, etc.
- *Partial Group Involvement:* Groups may intentionally involve kids in part of the meeting (meal, or worship, etc.) but not the rest of the meeting.
- *Group Provides Childcare:* The group may opt to rotate parents or group members that can provide childcare during the meetings. Or perhaps the fathers watch the kids one meeting and the moms watch the kids the next meeting. Or some other arrangement.
- *Parents Partner for Childcare:* Some parents may choose to work together to arrange for childcare, such as hiring babysitters for the group children.
- *Benevolence Need:* In some cases it will be impossible for the group to provide childcare for one reason or another. After working through the above options if there is still a need please contact your community group coach to see if benevolence funds may be appropriate to pay for childcare for a season for a particular family.

As noted above, since parents have the responsibility to care for their children any childcare options should be optional and agreed to by participating parents in the group. We encourage good principles for child protection to be followed and refer people to our manual on child protection.

Kids and Community Groups: Outside the Group Mtg

Every group is encouraged to pursue aspects of relationship-building and mission beyond the group and this can be another great place to consider involving kids. Could a cookout be held at a place kids can run and play? Could a prayer walk include some kids in strollers? Get creative.

Kids and Community Groups: Two Sample Groups

What can this look like? Here are two sample group formats from Cross of Grace groups.

Group A: In a group with lots of kids under the age of 5 one group determined to do a meal each time and to involve the kids fully in the meal. They also shared life updates and prayer requests over the meal. Then they tried for about about 20-30 minutes of Bible study—sometimes with the dads or moms rotating in watching the kids (as the parents had agreed earlier).

Group B: In a group with older kids that could play independently one group allowed kids to play outside and in an adjoining group where the kids were within easy view of the parents in the meeting. Often one or more parents were assigned to stand in the back and check regularly on the kids and get the appropriate parents when necessary.

Community Group Leader Responsibilities

Leaders are expected to do the following:

Prepare and Lead the Meeting // Listen to the sermon on Sundays and take notes. Go over the questions provided by the Pastors for use at the CG meeting. Facilitate the meeting by following the suggested template and times for the different components of the meeting, sharing, bible study and prayer.

Track the Needs of Group Members // As a group leader, you will often be the first line of spiritual defense in the lives of your group members. It will be your responsibility (along with your host) to keep in touch with the spiritual pulse of the people in your group. You can also ask for someone in the group to help keep track of prayer requests in the meeting and follow up during the week.

Communicate Special Needs Up-Line to Your Coach // It's possible that some issues will surface in your group or in a member's life that are beyond your experience, expertise, or comfort zone. In that case, communicate your concerns up-line to either your coach or one of the pastors on staff for guidance or additional help.

Complete Basic CG Reporting // Group leaders need to log in confirm who attended the meeting. This can be done online. This information is very important. They not only help us track who is in a group; they also help the pastoral staff keep an overall pulse on the groups as a whole. Also please share prayer needs when you log in.

Visit Members in the Hospital (When Possible) // When a crisis or major illness hits, your group needs to spring into action. While your host will take the lead in providing any needed meals or practical help, you as a small group leader need to be sure that you and others from the group are available for prayer and support.

Lead the Group on Mission // Our groups are also meant to be on mission as our members are sent on mission. See the above section on involvement in mission. Consider handing off missional projects, or missional support, to another individual or couple in the group who can follow up on opportunities and help organize the group.

Host Responsibilities

Hosts normally provide a place for the Community Group to meet at but in some cases the meeting is at the CG Leader's house. Whatever the case may be you are a vital part of the leadership team. The combination of a committed leader and a committed host (each focusing on their role within the group) is hard to beat. Here's a list of some of your primary responsibilities. Hosts are expected to the help with the following:

Provide a Clean, Comfortable Home Environment

Some key questions:

- *Is the house clean and picked up by meeting time?* A clean living room, kitchen and bathroom help people relax and feel comfortable.
- *Do we have enough comfortable chairs?* If needed, church can provide additional chairs for seating.
- *Do I have enough lighting?* A well-lit (not glaring!) room energizes a group, while a dark or dimly lit room de-energizes it.
- *Is the house free of dog or cat odors?* If you have indoor pets, your house may well have odors that you've grown accustomed to. Ask a good friend for an honest evaluation! Also, remember that many people are allergic to dogs or cats. It's a good idea to ask your group about this at your first meeting. If it's a problem, you may need to keep your animals out of the house before or during the meeting.
- *Do we need to do anything specific to help with kids?* Depending on what your group has decided to do regarding childcare (see attachment) you may need to make sure you have things in place for them (extra seating, etc.)

Provide a Warm and Friendly Environment // This involves things like introducing folks to one another during your first potluck/meeting; making sure to talk with and involve the shy or quiet members before and after meetings; and keeping in touch with group members between meetings.

Provide Feedback for the Leader // One of the host's most important jobs is to discuss and evaluate the group with the leader on a regular basis. This often can be done informally after everyone leaves. Items to discuss include the following: What's going well in the group? What's not? Who's hurting? How can you, as a host, help? Is the meeting moving along at a good pace? Is it dragging at some points?

Provide Support for the Leader // Another way to help your leader is to jump-start the discussion when it lags. Sometimes a question will elicit no response (either because everyone is nervous

or because the question is unclear). Whenever this happens, you can assist your leader by breaking the ice and answering the question yourself. Or, if the question is unclear, you can ask the leader to rephrase it. This provides a opportunity to regroup and come at the issue from a different angle. Knowing that a host will help him or her out of a jam gives a leader a lot of security.

Organize Meals for Members in special need circumstances // One of a host's most important jobs is to make sure that anyone in the group who faces a significant crisis gets the practical help and support they need. Hosts should organize the group to meet practical needs, provide meals or render any special assistance that's needed.

Organize Meals or Snacks // Hosts are responsible to organize the refreshments and/ or desserts. The host is *not* expected to provide them—in fact the group will grow together as everyone will participates. You may also need to help step in and organize special events like cookouts or parties.