

LIFE GROUP LEADERS HANDBOOK

Published August 18, 2009
Revised February 15, 2013

VERSION 2.0
Growing Together in Servant Leadership

*Dedicated to those who have a not-so-small
love for God and an ever-growing heart to help others
learn to live, love, and lead like Jesus*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE OF LIFE GROUPS.....	4
Why Life Groups?.....	4
What is a Life Group?.....	7
What Are Key Distinctives of FBC’s Life Groups Ministry?	8
How Life Groups Fit Into the Mission & Vision of FBC	8
LEADERSHIP AND LIFE GROUPS	9
The Significance of Leadership	9
Qualifications of Life Group Leaders.....	9
Essential Tasks of a Life Group Leader	10
Motives for Leadership	11
Ministry Description for Life Group Leader.....	12
Ministry Description for Apprentice Life Group Leader	13
STARTING A LIFE GROUP.....	14
How Will People Know About Life Groups?	14
How Can People Get Involved In a Life Group?	14
Where Can I Find People For My Life Group?.....	15
What Should I Do During Our First Meeting As A Group?	16
What Are Some Icebreakers and Discussion-Starters?	17
LEADING A LIFE GROUP.....	20
Key Facets of Group Facilitation.....	20
The Art of Asking Good Questions	20
How to Kill Self-Discovery?	23
Taking Your Life Group Deeper.....	23
Common Mistakes Leaders Can Make Early On	28
Relational Guidelines for Life Group Leaders	29
LIFE IN LIFE GROUPS.....	31
Characteristics of a Healthy Life Group	31
Developmental Stages of Life Group Growth.....	31
CURRICULUM FOR LIFE GROUPS	33
What is Biblical Orality, Storying, or Story-Telling?	33
What is The Goal of Storying?.....	34
Can We Go Deep Enough With This Approach?	34
SHEPHERDING LIFE GROUP MEMBERS	35
Key Components in the Shepherding Process	35
What Should I Do During a One-on-One Meeting Time?	35
COACHING LIFE GROUP LEADERS	36
What is a Coach?	36
Examples of Shepherding in the Bible	36
Requirements and Role of a Life Group Coach	37

GROWTH OF OUR LIFE GROUP MINISTRY.....	38
Becoming a Church Of Life Groups.....	38
Life Groups Ministry Structure.....	39
Why We Use Homes for Life Groups.....	39
Multiplying New Life Groups.....	40
Methods of Multiplication.....	41
Obstacles to Multiplication.....	41
EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT.....	42
COMMON PROBLEMS LEADERS FACE.....	42
Dealing with Criticism.....	42
Types of Disruptive Behavior.....	42
Confronting Disruptive Behavior.....	43
Answering Tough Questions.....	44
Dealing with Group Conflict.....	44
Dealing with Tense Moments.....	45
Dealing with Silent Behavior.....	46
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ).....	47

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS - This Handbook is meant to be a guide, not a model, of Life Groups Ministry. It is a beginning, a work-in-progress. It can, and will need to, be added to, taken away from, improved, corrected, edited in any way necessary to make it as effective a tool as possible in helping Life Group Leaders and participants become everything they can be in Jesus. It has been written utilizing the resources of many who have gone before us. We are incredibly thankful to God for them.

PURPOSE OF LIFE (SMALL) GROUPS

Why Life (small) Groups?

One of the first and most important questions we need to address is, “Why Life Groups?, or more commonly called small groups?” The question is asked in many different ways, such as: With everything happening in our church already, why add Life Groups to the mix? Aren’t Life Groups just another fad the church has grabbed onto or a clever gimmick church leaders are using to inflate church attendance? What’s the big deal about Life Groups? No matter how it is stated, the underlying question is still the same: “Do Life Groups have a true biblical purpose in the church?”

We would answer a resounding “Yes!” While we agree that small groups can be misused and misunderstood, we also believe the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that small groups are biblical, life-changing vehicles for ministry, emphasized by Jesus Himself and embraced by the Early Church.

For example, in the life of Jesus, His earthly ministry emphasized the small group from the beginning to the end. When He began His public ministry, one of His first acts was to establish His small group – the apostles (Matt. 4:18-22; Luke 6:13). He would end up spending the majority of His time with them in relational environments where He constantly devoted Himself to helping them grow in life, love, and leadership. And while Jesus often proclaimed the Kingdom of God to large crowds, He also met with smaller groups of people in homes (Matt. 26:6). While both large and small groups were vitally important in His life, it is interesting to note that His ministry to small groups often preceded His ministry to large groups. In many ways, Jesus’ small group ministry was the backbone of His ministry.

In the case of the Early Church, the New Testament repeatedly endorses the importance of small groups. For example, the Book of Acts tells us the early believers often met together publicly, in the temple courts, as a large group, but it also tells us they gathered together in smaller groups which were held in people’s homes.

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47 NIV)

Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 5:42 NIV)

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. (Acts 20:20 NIV)

But when it comes to answering the question of “Why Life Groups?” one of the best responses to this question comes from Dan Lentz in an article he wrote entitled, “Why Small Groups?”¹ His answer reflects why FBC is deeply committed to fostering a ministry of small groups. His article appears below in its entirety:

Whenever I’m faced with a question like, “Why should we use small groups?” I like to review a little background. When Jesus left the earth and ascended into heaven (Acts 1:1–15), the disciples were left looking up into the sky in wonder and mystery. Rather than going their separate ways, those disciples gathered back together in an upper room in Jerusalem.

Being together was the one thing they knew to do after spending these last few years together with Jesus. It was in the upper room that the next part of God’s plan was set into motion. What transformed a few sinful and selfish individuals from sky-staring groupies to a world changing small group?

Christ’s Holy Spirit.

At its core, a small group is simply a gathering of Spirit-indwelt people who have intentional growing relationships with the Lord and each other, and who use those relationships to help fulfill Christ’s mission for the church. The essence of small groups is not much more complex than that.

It’s tempting to try and attach a lot of other motivations for doing small groups. Motivations like: it keeps people connected, groups will help our church grow, it takes the pressure off our church facility space, and more. These motivations are valid in several ways. But until you can embrace the simple value of the early church pattern that a small group is people in mission-driven relationship to God and one another, you will always have value confusion in your church about the nature of small groups. And, without missional relational ministry, we fall short of our calling as a Christian community.

Got Life Groups?

Interestingly enough, I don’t know of a church that doesn’t have small groups in one form or another. Lots of them don’t have declared Life Groups Ministries, but people get into small groups regardless of whether small groups are an “official” ministry or not. People naturally and automatically seek out relationships. It’s been said that if someone new to the church doesn’t form a relationship with someone else within a few months, they are likely to leave the church or at best always be on the fringe.

Jesus didn’t try to organize a small-groups ministry. Instead, he started a relational ministry that functioned in a small group. He modeled and taught what it means to live in relationship to God and one another through his everyday life. Yes, Jesus participated in the Jewish Synagogue activities, but his ministry was in everyday life.

Once Jesus ascended back to heaven, the believers continued the practice:

¹ Dan Lentz, *SmallGroups.com*, Christianity Today International, 2009.

They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47, NLT).

The results of this life together are that:

- The Body, the Church, heals itself as it is fitted together in community (Ephesians 4:11–16).
- Grace is administered in various forms (1 Peter 4:10).
- People are spurred on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:23–25).
- This biblical community creates a picture of Christ that non-believers see, and as a result, it attracts more and more people to Jesus (John 17:20–23).

Answering the Why Question Begins with Values

Settle the issue in your own mind and heart first. Is relational ministry in Life Groups an add-on program, one ministry among many, or part of the fabric of your overall church life? If you don't get clear on that, you will run into walls later. Even if you don't know yet where your church is on this value, at least make the issue clear with yourself before moving ahead. Otherwise, you may find it difficult to persevere through the hard work of growing Life Groups.

Consider what Paul said in Colossians 1:28–2:3:

So everywhere we go, we tell everyone about Christ. We warn them and teach them with all the wisdom God has given us, for we want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. I work very hard at this, as I depend on Christ's mighty power that works within me. I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other friends who have never known me personally.

My goal is that they will be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have full confidence because they have complete understanding of God's secret plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (NLT, *my emphasis*).

Paul said he worked very hard to achieve the goal of people being encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. He said the result of this work, of this knitting people together, was that these relational ties would help people know Christ himself.

You and I won't ever know Jesus Christ as well as we could unless we are knit together with others. I share my life stories with you; you share your life stories with me. Together, we share the life story of Jesus as revealed in

Scripture. And, over time, our life stories start to sound a lot more like Jesus' life story.

Watch the Language!

I have found that a big key is to watch my language, both in personal conversations and public forums. I would never say the essence of church is a building, worship service, or set of traditions. But I have learned that when I constantly say I am “going” to church or involved in things “at” church, or I ask someone “where” his church is located or what “time” church starts, I communicate that church is really about what happens in a specific building at a specific time each week. Everything else that happens in life—including family, vocation, and even Life Groups—is automatically seen as secondary to “doing church.”

You might say it's just semantics, but your vocabulary indicates what you think and believe. Be clear about your paradigm: do you go to church or are you being the church?

Like the apostle Paul, you must have clarity about the importance of relational ministry in your own heart, and be living it yourself so you will be willing to work hard to declare it to others. When you have this clarity, then the next time you explain the “Why Life Groups?” question to the lady who just visited your weekend worship service, your elder board, or the unbelieving next door neighbor, you won't regurgitate an answer you learned from a book or small-group seminar. You will be able to speak from experience and passion.

Why small groups? As Lentz puts it: “At its core, a small group is simply a gathering of Spirit-indwelt people who have intentional growing relationships with the Lord and each other, and who use those relationships to help fulfill Christ's mission for the church.”² We agree that the essence of Life Groups is that simple.

What is a Life (Small) Group?

In a nutshell, we believe Life Groups are simply basic Christian communities – people who are seeking to do life together. As one sage puts it: “Small groups are intentional, face-to-face gatherings of small numbers of people who meet together regularly with the common purpose of discovering and growing in the possibilities of the abundant life in Jesus.”³ Life Groups are where people come to know God and experience His presence; and where they come to know each other and cultivate community. In Life Groups, people learn what it means to love each other, encourage each other, serve each other, and challenge each other. Life Groups are not only places of belonging, they are places of becoming. When carried out correctly, they are relational environments where people are free to be real with one another – where a group of people can learn to live, love, and lead like Jesus.

² Ibid.

³ Adapted from Lyman Coleman, *Serendipity Training Manual For Groups*, p. 12.

What Are Key Distinctives of FBC's Life Group Ministry?

The following distinctives reflect the Life Group ministry of FBC:

1. Life Groups are relationally focused - they are dynamic environments where the cultivation of relationships and friendships are the priority.
2. Life Groups are led by *skilled* leaders who have been trained at FBC to be leaders *who serve by leading and who lead by serving*.
3. Life Groups are led by *supported* leaders who are shepherded and coached in their growth as leaders and as followers of Jesus.
4. Life Groups are committed to the Word of God and to placing a high value on applying biblical truth to everyday life.
5. Life Groups meet on a regular basis, usually weekly, for an entire ministry year (Mid-September through Mid-June).
6. Life Groups are committed to continually developing new leaders through apprenticeship.
7. Life Groups must be committed to growing and multiplying, branching on average every 9-18 months.
8. Life Groups are committed to making an eternal difference for Jesus in their community and beyond.
9. Life Groups are not meant to be "just another program" in the church; they are meant to be our primary model for doing and being the church.

How Life Groups Fit Into the Mission & Vision of FBC

At FBC, we do not believe the church is a building or a program or some kind of spiritual clinic. We believe the church is God's people. To put it another way, we believe "we" are the church. And as the church, we don't want to be an "organized religion!" We don't want to live for pious phrases and religious activity. We don't want to just know where we *fit* - we want to experience how we *fit together* in Christ. We want to experience in tangible ways how God can use us together for something far bigger than ourselves. We want to make an eternal difference for Him. We want to be passionate about building relationships and friendships, and sharing our lives together in gospel-living. We want to better understand how we can do life together on mission with God, and then do it! And we believe one the greatest connecting opportunities and catalysts for accomplishing all of this is the Life Groups. This is why we want to become more than a church *with* Life Groups - we want to become a ministry *of* Life Groups.

LEADERSHIP AND LIFE GROUPS

The Significance of Leadership

In Scripture, leadership is characterized by *ministry* and *service*. The one who is not willing to serve is not ready to lead. In Mark 10:45, Jesus set the standard when He said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (NIV). Leaders are those who wear the towel of a servant (John 13:1-17) and model the life, love, and leadership of Jesus with others. Here are key characteristics of leadership we believe are clearly defined and practiced in Scripture:⁴

- **Leaders shepherd others.** While some may have the gift of leadership, and others the gift of teaching, and still others, the gift of mercy or administration, regardless of their gifting, all Life Group Leaders function as shepherds. Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd who was concerned about the health and well-being of the flock, who was willing to lay down His very life for His sheep because He loved them (John 10:14).
- **Leaders work together.** Jesus called His followers into a small group community in order to develop them as leaders. “He appointed twelve...that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14 NIV). When it was time for them to participate in ministry, Jesus sent them out in groups (i.e., the twelve in Matthew 10) and in pairs (see Luke 10:1). When needs were prevalent in the early church community, teams and groups were appointed to provide gift-based servant leadership (see Acts 6).
- **Leaders love others.** Leaders will never truly earn the right to fully lead those whom they do not love. Caring, trusting relationships form the foundation for every vibrant community and leaders must set the pace by following Christ’s example (John 13:1). Love for God, the church, for the small group, and for the lost are trademarks of growing leaders.

Qualifications of Life Group Leaders

We understand that leaders come in a wide variety of personalities, gifting, and ministry styles. We also recognize that when we ask the question of who is qualified to lead Life Groups, the answers often move to one of two extremes. The first extreme is to raise the bar so high regarding qualifications that even the Apostle Paul would have trouble qualifying to lead a Life Group. The other extreme is to set the bar so low that people believe anyone with a pulse can lead a Life Group. We refuse to fall into either extreme. Instead, we believe the qualifications are indeed high in Scripture, but we do not believe they equate to perfection or sainthood. In other words, the qualifications are challenging, but they are also very achievable and doable. We also believe time must be factored into these qualifications since every leader is to be growing in them, and many

⁴ Adapted from John Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 37.

of the characteristics simply take time to develop. We believe an FBC Life Group Leader should meet the following qualifications:

- Heart for God and a growing commitment to serve Jesus Christ (I Tim. 4:13-16).
- Confidence and trust in the Bible as God's Word and as the authoritative guide for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 4:12)
- Committed to growing in character (Prov. 4:23; I Tim. 4:12)
- Demonstrates good people skills and relational intelligence.
- Values relationships; able to make friends and be a friend; pursues community.
- Displays a heart for ministering to others.
- Keeps commitments and follows through.
- Follows the spiritual leadership of the FBC elders and pastors (Heb. 13:17)
- Abides by the FBC Membership Commitment.
- Agrees with the core distinctives and values of FBC Life Groups and the mission/vision of the church.

Essential Tasks of a Life Group Leader

There are several essential tasks every FBC Life Group Leader must be willing to pursue with his/her Life Group:⁵

1. Steward the process and purpose of their Life Group (e.g., Take responsibility for making sure ground rules work).
2. Minister to the needs of the group members and help group members do the same – help the group cultivate habits/values of being grace-filled and truth-telling, such as:⁶
 - Caring (e.g., being for each other, encouraging one another, coming alongside one another).
 - Safety (e.g., having a “come-as-you-are” culture, feeling safe enough to be yourself, accepting each other unconditionally).
 - Authenticity (e.g., being real with each other, taking relational risks with one another, discovering appropriate levels of sharing).
 - Growth (e.g., encouraging one another on to love and good deeds, pushing each other to take growth steps).
 - Help (e.g., providing practical resources others may need, asking for help when needed).
3. Help group members move toward spiritual maturity – toward becoming more like Jesus.
4. Motivate group members toward ministry – help and encourage them to use their gifts for God.
5. Multiply the life and mission of the group – help them understand and accomplish what God is calling them to do. (Raise up an apprentice leader).

⁵ Adapted from Lifetogether.com, *SmallGroups.com*, Christianity Today International, 2004.

⁶ Henry Cloud, Bill Donohue, John Townsend, *Regroup Participant's Guide*, 2007, 25.

Motives for Leadership

Motives must be considered when it comes to leadership. The following lists some appropriate motives of a godly leader:⁷

- **Serve Christ**
Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Col. 3:23-24 NIV)
- **Bear fruit in your life**
This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:8 NIV)
- **Keep watch over (shepherd) others**
Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28 NIV)
- **Be an example to the body**
Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Pet. 5:2-4 NIV)
- **Use your gifts to serve others**
It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13 NIV)
- **Communicate the message of reconciliation**
that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:19-21 NIV)

There are also a number of wrong motives and hindrances when it comes to leadership, such as:⁸

- **Self-exaltation**
Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips. (Prov. 27:2 NIV)

⁷ This section is adapted from John Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 42-43.

⁸ *Ibid.* 43.

- To feel important or gain prestige
On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. (1 Thess. 2:4-6 NIV)
- Because someone pressured you
Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; (1 Pet. 5:2a NIV)
- Having a short fuse or exhibiting outbursts of anger
My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. (James 1:19-20 NIV; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:31)
- Unconfessed sin
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 NIV)
- Biblical error or false teaching
For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:3-4 NIV)

Ministry Description for a Life Group Leader

Ministry Overview – The Life Group Leader helps facilitate and lead the Life Group.

Ministry Qualifications:

- Heart for God and a growing commitment to serve Jesus Christ (I Tim. 4:13-16).
- Confidence and trust in the Bible as God's Word and as the authoritative guide for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 4:12)
- Committed to growing in character (Prov. 4:23; I Tim. 4:12)
- Demonstrates good people skills and relational intelligence.
- Values relationships; able to make friends and be a friend; pursues community.
- Displays a heart for ministering to others.
- Keeps commitments and follows through.
- Follows the spiritual leadership of the FBC elders and pastors (Heb. 13:17)
- Abides by the FBC Membership Commitment.
- Agrees with the core distinctives and values of FBC Life Groups and the mission/vision of the church.

Responsibilities:

- Stewards the process and purpose of their Life Group (e.g., takes responsibility for making sure ground rules work).

- Ministers to the needs of the group members and helps group members do the same – helps the group cultivate habits/values of being grace-filled and truth-telling, such as:
 - Caring (e.g., being for each other, encouraging one another, coming alongside one another).
 - Safety (e.g., having a “come-as-you-are” culture, feeling safe enough to be yourself, accepting each other unconditionally).
 - Authenticity (e.g., being real with each other, taking relational risks with one another, discovering appropriate levels of sharing).
 - Growth (e.g., encouraging one another on to love and good deeds, pushing each other to take growth steps).
 - Help (e.g., providing practical resources others may need, asking for help when needed).
- Helps group members move toward spiritual maturity – toward becoming more like Jesus.
- Motivates group members toward ministry – help and encourage them to use their gifts for God.
- Multiplies the life and mission of the group – helps them understand and accomplish what God is calling them to do. Raises up apprentice leader

Ministry Description for Apprentice Life Group Leader

Ministry Overview – The Apprentice Life Group Leader helps facilitate group discussion and leads other areas of the group meeting as assigned by the Life Group Leader. He/She also participates in all areas of group life both as a member of the group and as the apprentice leader.

Ministry Qualifications:

- Heart for God and a growing commitment to serve Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 4:13-16).
- Confidence and trust in the Bible as God’s Word and as the authoritative guide for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Heb. 4:12)
- Committed to growing in character (Prov. 4:23; 1 Tim. 4:12)
- Demonstrates good people skills and relational intelligence.
- Values relationships; able to make friends and be a friend; pursues community.
- Displays a heart for ministering to others.
- Keeps commitments and follows through.
- Follows the spiritual leadership of the FBC elders and pastors (Heb. 13:17)
- Abides by the FBC Membership Commitment.
- Agrees with the core distinctives and values of FBC Life Groups and the mission/vision of the church.

Responsibilities:

- Watch what the Life Group Leader does
- Help wherever the Life Group Leader needs help.
- Let the Life Group Leader assess your leadership abilities
- Eventually lead a group on your own.
- Prays with Life Group Leader for the group
- Helps evaluate group meetings and progress

STARTING A LIFE GROUP

How Will People Know About Life Groups?

In other words, how will people find out about these groups and then be able to get into one of them? The following highlights some of the things we will emphasize in seeking to let people know about our Life Groups:

- We will become more familiar than ever with our audience and who it is we are trying to involve and reach (i.e., we will become highly proficient in understanding the demographics of our church and community).
- We will emphasize the importance of the personal invite by Life Group Leaders and members. In other words, we will give the responsibility to Life Group Leaders for recruiting members to their own groups.
- We will not rely upon (and may only rarely use) mass media distribution to create interest in Life Groups (e.g., flyers, mass mailings, etc.). When mass media is used, it will only be done so if it is utilized in a strategic manner towards accomplishing our primary purpose (e.g., giving your neighbors a creative brochure which invites them to your home group).
- We will aggressively take advantage of the internet and technology (e.g., website, e-mail, Facebook, etc.) to inform and connect people.
- We will look for creative ways to utilize community networks and affinity groups (e.g., people with similar hobbies, interests, causes) as a way to inform and invite people.
- We will present people at FBC with easy opportunities for indicating their interest in getting more information about a Life Group and/or getting involved in one (e.g. information counter during Sunday services, comment cards, calling the church office, FBC Website, etc.). We will be prompt in replying to their requests.
- We will record and encourage stories from Life Groups to be shared often in the Sunday messages, worship service announcements, bulletin blurbs, website, etc.
- We will not promote the Life Groups Ministry in any way that undermines the value of other FBC ministries.

How Can People Get Involved In a Life Group?

When it comes down to it, there are basically three ways a person can get connected to a Life Group?

1. By invitation – Someone from a Life Group invites them to their group or they ask someone from a Life Group if they could join their group.

2. By request – They can indicate their request for being in a Life Group by signing up at the information counter during Sunday services, by writing their name and Life Group request on a Worship Service comment card, or by calling the church office, etc. They are then contacted about their interest.
3. By starting a new Life Group – They may choose to pursue training in order to lead a Life Group. If this is the case, they are encouraged to contact the Life Groups Ministry Staff in order to meet together and discuss this possibility.

Where Can I Find People For My Life Group?

Anywhere. Everywhere. Where you live. Where you work. Where you spend your free time. In church. Away from church. From your neighborhood or your workplace. From the sidelines of your child's soccer game to your class at the local gym. Maybe from right next to you on a Sunday morning. Here are a few more suggestions for finding people for your Life Group:

- Invite Christians and non-Christians from your own circle of friends.
- Let the Life Groups Ministry Staff know you are looking for members.
- Take advantage of events where you can get to know newcomers.
- Once your group is underway, regularly remind them that they are welcome to invite people.

How Can I Invite People To My Life Group?

There are several things you will want to communicate to prospective members when inviting them to your Life Group:

1. The Benefit: People need to know why this opportunity is a blessing not to be missed. What's in it for them? What beneficial change will occur? How will it improve their lives tomorrow?
2. The Environment: People need to know if the setting suits their lifestyle. Where will it happen? What kind of atmosphere will there be?
3. The Timeline: People need to know when it will happen and how long it will take. Time is their most important possession, and now you're asking for some.
4. The Leader: People need to know if the leader is credible. It's not about name, title, office, or educational degrees. It's about experience, spirituality, and trustworthiness. Who is the leader?

These things should be communicated clearly, concisely, and honestly - in a brief amount of time (i.e., be able to say all of this in a minute or two). Don't hesitate to point them to the FBC Life Groups webpage if they want to know more.

What Should I Do During Our First Meeting As A Group?

Now that you've invited people and they've accepted, what in the world should you do during your first meeting with them? Here are a few suggestions for helping your first meeting get off to a good start:

- Pray for God's blessing and wisdom. Leading a group is an incredible responsibility and challenge which God is perfectly capable of helping you meet.
- Remember that the first meeting is always a little uneasy and uncomfortable at some level. Don't be surprised if people are a little nervous, reserved, and even dissatisfied. Don't be discouraged if some don't return.
- Think about what you want to accomplish. Don't forget you are to be a servant for those He sends your way.
- If you have an apprentice, prepare for the meeting with him or her. If not, pray that God will help you clearly find one in the weeks ahead.
- Make sure everyone knows where and when the meeting takes place.
- If you have a host or hostess, contact him or her about the details of the meeting. A host or hostess should: 1) Create a warm, caring atmosphere; 2) Make sure refreshments, seating, etc. have been accounted for; and, 3) Greet people as they enter the room.
- Keep the meeting casual and informal.
- Share the nuts and bolts for the Life Group.
- Allow time for questions.
- Make a follow-up phone call after the first meeting and invite people to the second.
- Build a Scriptural foundation.
- Cast a big vision.

Here's a potential game plan for you first meeting:

- People arrive and mill around.
- Introductions (5-10 minutes) – Take time to have group members introduce themselves (name, hometown). Make sure you, the leader, also share. You may want to begin.
- Warm up with a group icebreaker (10-15 minutes). See samples below.
- Ask the group (10 minutes) – What expectations do you have for a Life Group like this? Or, what will make this experience worthwhile for you? Give them time to respond.
- Share your expectations and excitement for the group (2-4 minutes or less). For example, make new friendships, see how God is going to work in and through us, have a lot of fun together, etc.
- Begin to establish ground rules for the group (10-15 minutes). For example, attend the meetings, be on time, call if you can't make it, confidentiality, bring up issues or dissatisfaction right away, no interrupting or carrying on separate conversations, etc.
- Tell them the game plan (5-10 minutes) – Tell them about the series of passages we will be studying and about Storying (e.g., Following Jesus Together – Highlights from the Gospels).
- Let them know about the dream to raise up leaders and to see this group branch in the next 9-18 months. Let them know that if they don't like the

group, they don't have to stay. But hopefully they will enjoy it so much they will bring their friends.

- Close time in prayer. (Caution: Don't have them all pray unless you know that they are all comfortable praying out loud.) Confirm the meeting time, place, and Scripture they need to read for next week.
- Refreshments and hang out together time.

What Are Some Icebreakers and Discussion-Starters?

Using icebreakers and discussion-starters is a basic, yet essential Life Group skill. Icebreaker ideas and discussion-starters are designed to facilitate discussion about members' personal lives and to help them open up more freely. They are not designed for simple yes and no answers. Use discretion with these questions and statements. Some will evoke deep and serious responses. Others are light and funny. If your group is new, you should probably use questions and icebreakers that focus on information about people's lives (where they grew up, where they went to school, how they came to your church, where they work, etc.). As relationships develop and deepen in a group, begin to challenge people with more in-depth questions that evoke feelings, thoughts, and insights. Here are a number of samples, in no particular order:⁹

- What is your favorite movie and why?
- If money were no problem, and you could choose one place in the world to travel for a week, where would that place be and why?
- Write down your two favorite summer activities. Pair off and share those activities with one another, explaining why they are your favorites.
- Who is your number one advisor in life and why?
- One of my biggest pet peeves is _____.
- People might be surprised to find out that I _____.
- You have three wishes. What would you wish for?
- If you suddenly lost your eyesight, what would be the thing you missed seeing the most?
- What is the most daring thing you have ever done? What made it so daring?
- My favorite way to waste time is _____.
- You have one minute to speak to the entire nation on national television. What one or two things would you like to tell them?
- What's the story behind the longest time you've gone without sleep?
- What were the circumstances that surrounded your first kiss?
- Who is the most famous person you've known or met? How did it happen?
- When I dated, I was considered _____ because _____.
- If you could do one miracle (other than to make the whole world Christian), what would you do? Why?
- What do you miss most about childhood?
- What's the biggest lie you ever told?
- If given a choice, how would you choose to die? How do you not want to die?
- What is your biggest fear about death?
- If you could go to college (again), what would you study?
- What's the worst storm or disaster you've been in? What was it like?

⁹ Ibid., 110-113

- Describe the most boring day/event/period of time you can remember.
- What day of your life would you most like to relive? Why?
- What's the smallest space you've lived in? What was it like?
- I was (or would have been) voted "most likely to" _____ in high school?
- Just for the fun/thrill of it, before I die I'd like to _____.
- My number-two career choice would be _____.
- As a time traveler, I would most like to visit _____ because _____.
- What was one of the greatest adventures you have ever been on?
- If I could invent a gadget to make my life easier, I'd invent something that would _____ because _____.
- Next year looks better to me because _____.
- Next year may be a problem because _____.
- I am most like my mom in that I _____.
- I am most like my dad in that I _____.
- I wish before I got married someone had told me _____.
- I have never quite gotten the hang of _____.
- I'm a bundle of nerves/all thumbs when it comes to _____.
- I will probably never _____, but it would still be fun if I could.
- What are a couple of things you remember about your grandparents?
- What does your name mean? Why were you named for that?
- What is one of the most memorable dreams you have ever had?
- If you were going to leave the world one piece of advice before you died, what would you say?
- What was the best gift you received as a child?
- If you could raise one person from the dead, who would you raise and why?
- What was one of the nicest things anybody ever said about you?
- What one thing would you like your obituary to say about you? Why?
- What is your favorite city? Why?
- Where do you go or what do you do when life gets too heavy for you? Why?
- Which do you value most – sight or speech? Why?
- When you were growing up, who was the neighborhood bully? What made that person so frightening?
- What is the best news you have heard this week? The worst news?
- If your house were on fire, what three items (not people) would you try to save?
- What was your first job? What do you remember most about it?
- What was the best boss you ever had? What made him or her so good?
- When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? What did your parents want you to be?
- Who was your hero when you were growing up? How did you try to imitate him or her?
- What was your worst boss like?
- Why do you sin? (No simple answers allowed!)
- In what area of your life would you like to have greater peace? Why?
- If you could someday have a worldwide reputation for something, in what area would you like that to be? Why?
- What is one of your biggest fears about the future?
- What do you like best about children? Why?
- Of the things money can buy, what do you long for the most?
- Describe a grade school teacher that made a big impression on you (for good or bad).

- You have been granted one hour with the president of the United States. What would you ask? What would you like to say?
- You have been given a sabbatical from work. You can't go more than 150 miles for any one period of time. What would you do?
- Break your life into three equal segments. What was the most significant event from each of these periods of time?
- Something I have from my childhood I'll probably never give up is _____ because _____.
- The most useless thing in my/our house is _____, but it's still there because _____.
- The thing in my wallet/purse that tells the most about who I think I really am I is _____ because _____.
- When you were a child, what was your favorite time of day? Day of week? Time of year? Why were these favorites?
- In general, people worry too much about _____.
- When did God become more than a word to you? Please explain your answer.
- Describe your ideal house and how you would furnish it.
- If you could change one thing about your life what would it be?
- I want to be taken more seriously in the following area: _____.
- An emotion I often feel but don't usually express is _____.
- If you had to describe yourself to a stranger, what five words would best describe you?
- If God appeared to you right now and said you could ask Him any question you wanted and He would answer it on the spot, what one question would you ask Him?
- If you could pick one fictional character from TV or the movies that you could identify with, who would it be? Why?
- What is one relationship you would like to work on and why?
- What would the perfect day look like for you?
- If you could take a one-hour walk with any living person, who would you choose? Why?
- I really feel encouraged when _____.
- Pick one word from the list below you would use to describe your current connection or relationship with God and explain why you chose that word (you can use a word that is not on the list if you want to): close, new, careful, disconnected, intimidating, boring, searching, unsure, alone, friendly, loving, questioning, open, safe, angry, nonexistent, strange, peaceful, mysterious, doubtful, overwhelming, afraid, life-giving, stagnant, dynamic, in-trouble.

Here are a few questions we would *not* recommend asking:

- What's your greatest sin and why?
- Who do you like the most in the group?
- Who drives you the craziest in our group?
- Who has brought the worst-tasting refreshments to our group so far?
- If you could *not* be like one member of this group, who would that be? Please explain your answer in detail.

LEADING A LIFE GROUP

Key Facets of Group Facilitation¹⁰

Every meeting is an opportunity for ministry and for the further spiritual growth of each person present. Time together as a Life Group should be both enjoyable and beneficial. If people aren't being challenged to grow, they will settle for a rut of comfortable and stagnant spiritual mediocrity, or they will simply leave the group. Facilitation involves skillful "navigation," avoiding the extremes of skipping superficially through an "agenda" and getting bogged down and wasting precious opportunities.

- Get the group started and headed in the right direction.
- Bring the group into a "spiritual zone" with God and each other.
- Keep *your* involvement to the minimum necessary for optimal learning.
- Guide the group through the agenda with spiritual sensitivity.
- Make sure the group, rather than the facilitator, owns the process.
- Draw out reserved people; make sure no one dominates.
- Don't let curriculum "drive" the group.
- Manage conflict realizing it presents discipleship opportunities.
- Keep the group "on topic," by clarifying, redirecting, and summarizing.
- Make sure spiritual growth opportunities are fully developed.
- Bring the time to a healthy resolution and conclusion.

The Art of Asking Good Questions

Questions are a key part of an effective Life Group time. There are tremendous advantages for a leader in learning how to ask good questions. Here are a few of them:

1. Good questions can keep a meeting interesting and moving ahead.
2. Good questions can enable a leader to focus and direct the discussion.
3. Good questions make people think and when people think, they learn.
4. Good questions help a leader learn where people are really at. Without feedback, the leader we'll never know where people are really at spiritually, emotionally, relationally, let alone what they are learning or not learning.
5. Good questions can create good interaction among group members. Good interaction helps relationships develop within the group. Growing relationships helps learning and application.

Asking questions to help guide a conversation and to help people discover truth for themselves is nothing new. Jesus Himself constantly used questions throughout the Gospels (e.g., Luke 8:30; John 3:10; Mark 2:25-28; Matt. 23:17; Mark 8:20; Mark 3:4). As one person put it, "Jesus didn't come to answer questions, He came to ask them." Here are some key suggestions for how to ask good questions:

¹⁰ *Leading Relational Discipleship Groups*, Training Manual from River Valley Community Church, Grants Pass, Oregon, 17.

- Avoid using close-ended questions. Closed-ended questions are pointed and obvious. A close-ended question leaves no room for continuing the conversation because it usually requires a yes or no answer. These kinds of questions inhibit group discussion and do not promote learning or community. Examples of closed-ended questions are: “Did Jesus die on the cross to save us?” “Do you think that Jesus should be Lord of your life?”
- Recognize there is no value in leading kinds of questions (e.g., Of course you all agree, don’t you? Surely, you don’t think that, do you?). Avoid using questions that assume an answer. Don’t over-suggest answers in your questions. Lead people and direct them toward the answers, but don’t drag them into the answers. For example, instead of asking, “Jesus died on the cross for you, didn’t He?” or, “The purpose of evangelism is to reach the unsaved, right?” Instead, ask something like, “What do you feel was the primary purpose of Christ’s death?” “What you see as the purpose of evangelism?”
- Recognize there is little value in limiting kinds of questions. These kinds of questions limit the number of “correct” answers to a particular question. Limiting questions don’t stimulate discussion. They only turn everything into a mind-reading contest as the leader uses them to try and get the group to answer what he wants. (e.g., What are the three great truths from this passage? Do you think Jacob was obedient or disobedient?).
- Recognize the tremendous value of open and wide-open questions in facilitating discussion, which stimulate discovery, understand and application, depending on how you word the questions. Open questions don’t imply an answer, but they do cause a person to think. They use key words like who, where, when, why, what, and how. Open questions are more difficult to prepare, but they can help make for a lively discussion. Some examples of open questions are:
 - Who do you most identify with in the passage? Why?
 - What do you observe from this passage? What seems most important?
 - What do you think Jesus was trying to teach the disciples?
 - What do you think Jesus is trying to teach you right now?
 - What other thoughts does anyone have?
- Be prepared to wait for an answer. Give a person time to think. People process information and questions at different rates. You may want to restate the questions. Also, be attentive to second thoughts. Often a person will think of more to say on an issue or be able to clarify his position after he makes his first statement. It’s common for people to think about what they should have said. Don’t be afraid to ask, “Do you have any more thoughts on this? Would you like to add anything else?”
- Listen attentively. Keep good eye contact with the person. Refuse to glance off because he doesn’t seem eager to respond. Be observant of what people say or don’t say. For example, does a person tend to talk about himself all the time (e.g., he continually uses *I*, *me*, *mine*) or does he tend to talk about others (e.g., uses *you*, *them*)

- Be open to answer a question with a question. Sometimes people will try to force you to defend yourself. Their purpose is to show you they disagree and they want to get you to take a position so they can attack you. They may start with a question like, “Do you think the Bible is inspired?” You may want to respond with, “What do you think?” This allows for them to express themselves without you having to declare your position prematurely.
- Learn when and how to use direct and indirect questions. A direct question causes a person to take an open stand and declare a position (e.g. “What do you think Bill? Are you a Christian?”). You should be careful not to use direct questions too soon in your relationships with people because they can easily offend. An indirect question is more impersonal and is not directed at anyone. (e.g. “What does the Bible say about this? How can you tell that Jesus is Lord of a person’s life?”).
- Avoid using “and” or “but” in your questions since these words usually introduce a second question and end up confusing the listener. Keep the question as simple as possible.
- Use questions that focus on a specific term. Use words or phrases that cause one’s mind to crystallize or focus on only one, or just a few, ideas. Use words like “main point,” “big idea,” “most important.” For example, don’t ask, “How did your discussion go?” Instead, ask, “What was the most interesting thing that happened in your discussion group tonight?”
- Remember that how you ask a question is as important as, or even more important than, what you ask. This is called the “tone” of a question. Keep the tone as gracious and loving as possible.
- What about difficult questions? Don’t ever be afraid to say, “I don’t know.” If you don’t know the answer, don’t pretend you do. You can always find the answer later or have someone else research it. There is no benefit in being known as a “know-it-all.”
- Keep application as the goal of the discussion. God wants to change us not just inform us. We want Scripture to move from our heads, through our hearts, to our feet. Two examples of application-oriented questions are: 1) What is one thing God is teaching you from this passage? 2) In light of what God is teaching you, how do you see it affecting your life this week?

The real key in asking questions is your genuine concern and interest in people. Genuine questioning conveys the attitude that you are truly interested in what people have to say. True conversation begins where people genuinely want to share in another person’s thoughts. If you are really interested in what the other person feels, thinks, and believes, you will never be ineffective in asking questions.

How to Kill Self-Discovery?

The following reminds every leader that there are many ways he or she can destroy self-discovery in a Life Group:¹¹

- Ask “Yes” or “No” questions. For example, “Is God’s love like human love?” (These are guaranteed discussion killers.)
- Ask leading questions when you should be using open questions, such as: “We struggle in our Christian life because we don’t understand forgiveness, don’t you think?” (Consider silence the norm if you ask this question.)
- Ask two-part questions that have “and” or “but” in them. Compound questions can be confusing. For example, “What does Jesus say here and do you agree and how can you apply His teaching to your life?” (Questions like this are destined for blank stares.)
- Immediately answer your own questions. The leader asks, “How are we filled by the Spirit?” and before the group can think about it, he answers, “Of course, by faith.” (Group members aren’t really even necessary if the leader hogs all the answers.)
- Fear silence and immediately fill it with some comment or answer. (Try some duct tape or a pair of rolled up socks if you can’t help from saying something.)
- Laugh or criticize a given answer. (This will do wonders for group participation and unity. Do it often enough and the last laugh will be on you.)
- Act like you know it all. (Your group members might not want to say much, fearing they’ll sound stupid before their omniscient, all-wise leader.)
- Ask only objective questions, such as “What does the word ‘believe’ mean?” (Some of the most powerful questions relate to feelings. For example, “How do you feel when you slam the car door on your hand?”)
- Ask questions regarding content only, and not application. (The goal is knowledge that leads to a changed life, not knowledge that leads to more knowledge.)
- Wing it. Don’t prepare questions ahead of time. Just go with the flow. (Good questions take time to prepare even if you are the King of Wing or Princess of Impromptu.)

Taking Your Life Group Deeper

Many leaders want to know how they can take their small groups deeper. The following article was written by John Ortberg and is entitled “No More Mr. Nice Group.”¹² It is an excellent article on practices that can take a Life Group to a deeper level:

God has entrusted us with his most precious treasure—people. He asks us to shepherd and mold them into strong disciples, with brave faith, and good character. I would not give my life to any church that was not serious about this calling—the transformation of human beings. God has decided, for his own good reasons, that people are not transformed outside of community.

¹¹ This has been adapted from a Small Group Handbook that ???)

¹² John Ortberg, No More Mr. Nice Group, *Leadership*, Summer 2005, 35-39.

Years ago, while on vacation, I was going to fix something on the grill. I made a pile of charcoal, I poured a few gallons of lighter fluid over them, and I started the fire. My son was just fascinated by fire, as most young boys are. He asked what I was doing, and I told him.

"There's something about the way these little briquettes are constructed that when you put them together, the fire glows and they get real hot. And if you isolate one it cools off quickly. It loses the fire. But when they stick together, there's fire, because they feed off each other. God designed them to work that way."

This fits what Dallas Willard has said about the Christian life: "Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence better than scattered individuals." Think about that. Personalities united—people in community—contain more of God and his transforming power than isolated individuals. We should not be surprised that transformation requires community; it's how God designed us.

When we are alone, it's easy to think, incorrectly, that we are spiritually advanced. I can watch a Hallmark commercial alone and find myself moved to tears. I tell myself that I am a very compassionate person. But when I spend time in community with a person who annoys me, it's amazing how quickly I experience "compassion fatigue."

In community we discover who we really are and how much transformation we still require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings.

However, experience tells us that simply meeting with a small group does not automatically result in spiritual growth. There are certain practices that must be present, spiritual disciplines that must occur, to facilitate the transforming work of Christ in us. The presence of these things is what makes the difference between all-too-typical small groups, and life-transforming communities of spiritual formation.

What are these practices? I asked Dallas Willard that question once because he's forgotten more about spiritual formation and church history than I will ever know. His answer surprised me. He said, "I don't know." Rather than being discouraged, I saw this as a rare opportunity to discover something Dallas Willard didn't know. I launched into a time of deeper reflection and study.

After months looking at Scripture, reading church history, talking with respected people, and meeting with leaders of small groups, I don't think I have the definitive answer, but I have observed five essential practices:

- Confession: remove the masks

We all wear masks. We hide from each other. It's part of our fallenness. That is why one of the most formative practices in a small group is confession. Confession is the appropriate disclosure of my brokenness,

temptations, sin, and victories for the purpose of healing, forgiveness, and spiritual growth. Without confession we are a community hiding from the truth.

I know what it's like to do church with people who wear masks. I've attended very nice churches where people smiled, talked about their jobs or the weather, but never really removed their masks and revealed themselves.

I recall one couple, pillars of the church, whose marriage fell apart when the wife ran away with another man. The church was shocked; the couple had hid the reality of their troubled marriage for years. Another woman in the church was well liked by everyone, but one day she landed in the hospital to have her stomach pumped of the poison she had taken. She was so miserable she felt unable to face another day. And no one in the church knew.

I will not invest my life in a community that doesn't value truth and confession, and neither should you. Without confession we cannot accomplish our God-given calling to transform people.

Throughout church history, whenever God has done great things, confession has always been present. In the church, confession must be freely offered—never manipulated. A Life Group serious about transformation should be moving into ever deeper confession—removing masks to reveal our core feelings and fears, sins we still struggle with, and areas where we're not growing.

We need to avoid "confession killers" in our groups. These include the inappropriate use of humor. Some people are embarrassed by deep honesty, so they may mock the person confessing or diffuse the atmosphere with a joke. It sends a signal that this is not a safe place to confess, and the masks go back on.

Judgmental statements also shut down confession. I recall a Life Group where a man admitted his struggle with lust. That was a risk, and then someone else said, "I can't relate to that struggle at all." I wanted to say to that guy, "What kind of hormonally challenged, repressed robot are you?" His statement shut down an opportunity for new openness in the group.

To see real transformation, Life Groups must begin with reality. By removing our masks through the discipline of confession, we acknowledge the reality of who we are and open ourselves to God's transforming work.

- Application: look in the mirror

James 1:23 says, "Those who listen to the word, but do not do what it says, are like people who look at their faces in the mirror, and after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like." A small group is a place for people to look into the mirror, discover who they are, and then ask, "How do I apply God's word to my life as it really is?"

As a teacher I am regularly astonished by people's ability to hear a sermon, nod at it, be moved by it, write it down, and then do precisely the opposite of what they heard. This frequent occurrence shows the extent to which people need painstaking, patient, and careful application of Scripture to their daily lives.

We may hear biblical instructions like be gentle, be loving, be faithful—but how do I actually apply that to my boss, spouse, or kids? What would Jesus do if someone cut him off in traffic? Would he say, "I don't condemn you; go and sin no more?" Or, would he roll down the window and shout, "Woe to you, you whitewashed sepulcher, it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you?" What would Jesus do? A lot of people have heard about Jesus, but many have not been taught how to apply Jesus' teachings to their real lives. Life Groups can address this gap.

What we desperately need are Life Groups to be schools of life. Imagine someone has a problem with anger—a Life Group leader should ask them: "What kinds of situations tend to get you angry, and how do you respond?" Give them some alternatives to sinful patterns of anger. Role play these situations in the life Group. Then next week ask, "How did it go?" If they got it right, celebrate it. If they didn't, investigate what happened, and encourage them to do it differently next time.

If this kind of application doesn't happen in Life Groups, it may not happen anywhere, and people will not be transformed.

- Accountability: stand on the scale

I have made certain commitments about food and exercise in my life, but how serious I am about those commitments is difficult to determine without measuring my progress. A scale serves as a tool of accountability for me. Am I achieving my goal, or am I missing it? Ultimately the scale reveals how effective I have been in living up to my commitment.

Life Groups are the place for people to get on the scale and reveal how intentional they have been to pursue transformation into the image of Christ. William Paulson writes, "It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner." I think he understates it. People do not drift into full devotion to Christ. People do not drift into becoming loving, joy-filled, patient, winsome, world changers. It requires intention and effort.

But the default mode of the human heart is to drift. If a person has experienced real transformation, it's typically because someone else has cared enough to say, "I want you to live God's way, and I want to help you know if you are serious about it."

We need to make some key decisions on our journey of transformation: what are my commitments about prayer, about Scripture, about my use of money, about evangelism, about servanthood, about truth? Keeping these commitments requires a community of accountability to serve as a scale revealing how we're achieving our goals or missing them.

During the spiritual revolutions of 18th century England, the Wesleyan movement thrived on small groups. When those groups originally formed, they existed to hold people accountable to their commitments as followers of Christ. They gathered in little bands to ask one another how their obedience to Christ was going. History notes, however, that over the decades the focus of the groups shifted from accountability to vague "sharing," in the process the power of the revival was lost, and eventually the groups died out.

- Guidance: follow the map

When people need directions to a place they have never been, they use a map. Too often when people have major life-forming decisions to make, they make them alone.

In every church there are people facing decisions about vocations, ministry involvement, finances, relocation, and relationships. How sad if they make these decisions without the benefit of community. Their decisions may be impulsive, emotional, based on too little information. The result is too many broken lives.

The Life Group is to be where we find guidance, where we help each other learn how to listen to God. Life Groups who rely upon God's Spirit serve as a map for us when making important decisions. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster talks about guidance as a corporate discipline—something that groups should be doing together.

In the early church, the Spirit guided believers as a community. In Acts 13, for example, the church fasted, prayed, and listened to God. Then, in response to the Spirit's guidance, they sent out Saul and Barnabas to minister.

In Acts 15 the church faced a major decision about the behavior of Gentiles, and they listened to the Spirit's guidance so carefully that in the letter explaining their decision they were able to say, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Life Groups should be places where people gather to hear God through prayer and listening. Every Life Group meeting should include the question, "Is anybody facing a significant decision this week?" And in community the group should seek the Spirit's voice for the person facing the decision.

Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., practices this discipline by what they term "sounding the call." When someone has a significant decision to make, the community enters a time of prayer and listening to God. They speak openly with each other about their sense of what God is saying. They take seriously the leading of the Spirit while avoiding any sense of superiority or control.

- Encouragement: embrace each other

A hug is a gesture of love and encouragement. An embrace represents what we all need from a community of transformation. We need to know that someone is committed to us and loves us. That cannot happen when we are alone, and it cannot happen in a large gathering. It's going to happen through smaller communities.

Today Life Groups have the privilege of loving and accepting human beings for whom Christ gave his life. In these groups we can supply the love, encouragement, and embrace people need to continue their journey of transformation.

A long time ago I decided I wanted to talk to someone honestly about my temptations, where I had messed up. I wanted to practice the discipline of confession. So I asked my friend Rick if we could meet. By that time, I had known him for about ten years.

When we sat down together, I told him everything there was to tell about me—all of the darkest stuff and everything I felt the most embarrassed about.

When I got to the end my confession, I could barely look up at him. When I finally did, Rick looked me in the eyes and said, "John, I have never loved you more than I love you right now."

Those words were so powerful; they felt so good that I wanted to make up more bad stuff to tell him. To have someone know everything about me and still love me was truly life giving.

That kind of love is what we ultimately need in Life Groups to transform lives. We can make Life Groups so complex and difficult, we can build the perfect Life Group strategy, but if we do not have the love of Christ present, we are not really engaged in transforming people into his likeness.

Spiritual formation in community is mostly about loving people, and that is something we can do.

Common Mistakes Leaders Can Make Early On

The way a leader handles the first few meetings of a Life Group usually determines how effectively it will function over the course of its life span. Here are four typical blunders a leader can make in those first few meetings:¹³

1. Don't discuss your expectations up front. Remember that direction needs to be determined by the group, not just by the leaders, for a group to succeed.

¹³ Adapted from article by Corrine H. Holmquist, "Botched Beginnings," *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 71, 1992, p.100.

2. Expect everyone in the group to be equally and highly committed to the group. Remember that a person's commitment level is often affected by his or her circumstances, relationships, motivation, and energy. Commitment (to God as well as others) is a response that takes time. It's not something one can successfully demand.
3. Set goals higher than people can reach. Trying having desires for people instead of having goals for them. Instead of imposing formulas on people, try cultivation genuine relationships with them.
4. Respond to silence by dominating discussions. Remember that group silence is not necessarily bad.

Relational Guidelines for Life Group Leaders

Reaching out to others can involve relational, spiritual, and legal risks; therefore, here are some important insights in working with your Life Group:¹⁴

- Take precautions to ensure the confidentiality of all involved in our Life Group Ministry. What is said in the group should stay in the group; however, for discipleship reasons your Life Group Leaders may share with each other concerns that arise during the men's and women's time. Confidentiality may also involve the Life Group Leaders' sensitively sharing with their Life Group Coach or Pastor a serious sin or situation needing pastoral awareness or counsel.
- If you observe or suspect any physical injuries, or other types of abuse to a child or adult member, please contact your Life Groups Ministry Pastor. If further action needs to be taken, they will partner with you. Once again, all necessary precautions will be taken to ensure confidentiality.
- Be aware when children are a part of your Life Group...
 - Do not be in a private place with a child alone.
 - Do not go into a child's home while their parents are absent.
 - Do not provide care-giving to a child without being accompanied by another adult.
- When meeting with a member of the opposite sex...
 - Do not meet alone – take your spouse or another member of the same sex as the person needing assistance.
 - Within the Life Group setting, one-on-one times are sometimes appropriate with discernment.
- To the best of your ability...
 - Seek to give advice that is biblical and not contrary to the Bible.
 - Seek to be dependent on God by asking Him for wisdom.

¹⁴ Adapted from *Leading Relational Discipleship Home Groups*, River Valley Community Church, Grants Pass, OR, 27.

Bringing Your Group to a Healthy End

One thing is for certain about Life Groups – they all eventually come to an end. The question is - Do you want yours to come to its end in a living way or dying way? Here are some suggestions for bringing your group to a healthy end in a living way:¹⁵

- During the last meeting, talk about your experiences as a group and what the group has meant to you. Use affirmation questions/exercises to get the conversation flowing, such as: If you could give a gift to anyone in the room, what would you give and why? Pick someone in the room and name a characteristic they have that you are most thankful for. This ends the group on a positive note and helps members leave with good feelings about their Life Group experience.
- Fill out a written evaluation or survey, answering questions like, “What did you like most about the group? What did you like least? In which area of your spiritual life do you feel you grew the most as a result of meeting with this Life Group?”
- Plan to keep in touch in the future, but don’t over-promise (For example, set up a fellowship time one month after your last meeting, just to see how everyone is doing.)
- After the group closes, have the leader(s) and host or hostess write a note of appreciation and encouragement to each member.
- Be sure your coach has a complete list of all participants for future reference.
- At the final meeting the leader should exhort members to continue to pray for each other.

¹⁵ Judy Hamille, Seven Steps That Bring A Group To A Healthy End, *Small Group Journal, Discipleship Journal*, Issue 56, 1990, p. 42.

LIFE IN LIFE GROUPS

Characteristics of a Healthy Life Group

It is one thing to be in a Life Group, it's another to be in a *healthy* Life Group. Here are some key characteristics of a healthy Life Group:

1. Group members are enjoying being with one another.
2. Group members are being built up and supported.
3. Group members are being challenged to change.
4. Leadership is rising up from the group.
5. There is a common mission the group is adopting concerning reaching out to the community.
6. The group is seeking to follow Jesus and to love others.

Developmental Stages of Life Group Growth

Building community takes time and every Life Group goes through specific stages of growth. Jeffrey Arnold in his volume, *The Big Book about Small Groups* observes three stages related to the development of a small group community.¹⁶

The first stage is called the exploration stage, where *unity is at the expense of diversity*. In stage one, everyone in the group wants a positive experience in their new situation so they will do whatever it takes to insure success. This includes not doing anything to rock the boat or upset the encouraging climate of the group. In many ways, this is the easiest stage to enjoy, but for your group to grow, you must move to the next stage.

Stage two is called the transition stage, where *diversity is now at the expense of unity*. During this stage, group members begin to take issue with each other as they begin to confront the wide variety of personal beliefs and practices. These can range from work philosophies to theological issues, personal biases to global issues, character flaws to home life. A healthy group and leader seek to confront this diversity in positive ways. This is where the leader needs to facilitate this process, knowing that great harm or great good can come from this stage. They need to help the members discover that everyone does not think the same, believe the same things, or have the same kind of personality. The members may need to be almost forced to recognize that people are not all like them, and that's okay. They need to learn forgiveness in the midst of their conflicts. During this time, they will either make a commitment to work things out (as a group) until they can honestly love each other, or just pretend to love each other, or disconnect and reject one another. This is a difficult stage in the life of the group, but it is important to understand that if the members are going to truly connect, they need to go through this stage. This is the stage where real community is formed.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book About Small Groups*, 105-109.

Stage three is the action stage, where *unity now travels alongside of diversity*. This is the time when group members can begin to be themselves - to let their guard down and admit their faults and weaknesses. As the community matures, it is also a time when each member of the group realizes they have something to give to every other member. This is where the group really “takes off.”

CURRICULUM FOR LIFE GROUPS

There are many different kinds of curriculum a Life Group can choose to use and an equal number of ways to present it. We are choosing to use the Bible as our curriculum and Orality, Storying, or Story-telling as our approach to learning and understanding it.

What is Biblical Orality, Storying, or Story-Telling?

Biblical Orality, Storying, or Story-telling is a sequential approach to sharing biblical truth that remains true to Scripture. It is taking a text or passage and telling it in context. It includes a time of dialogue and discovery after telling the story. In the dialogue, the person telling the story uses questions to guide listeners to discover the meaning and significance of the biblical story. Storying allows for the biblical stories to speak for themselves.

Think about it for a moment. Everyone loves a story. As one writer puts it: "No matter where one travels in this world, people love to tell and listen to stories. Whether used to argue a point, interject humor, illustrate a key insight, comfort a despondent friend, challenge the champion, or simply pass the time of day, a story has a unique way of finding its way into the conversation,...all enjoy entering the life experiences of others through stories."¹⁷ And stories are powerful. They have the ability to attract our attention, invite participation, encourage community, indirectly challenge worldviews, move and shape us, help us remember, link experiences to facts, provide context and structure, spark our imagination, touch our minds and emotions.¹⁸ In other words: "We live in stories. Stories are the language of our world. Think about your favorite movies – they draw you in...you begin to feel what the characters feel...their pain becomes your pain...their victory becomes your victory. We enter stories and make them part of our experience. Stories are the most powerful form of communication we have."¹⁹

It is important to recognize that beliefs and culture are passed on through storytelling. The Bible is an oral document (a story). The content of the Bible was originally written down so that it could be retold aloud with 75% of it written in the form of stories and poetry. There are many examples of storytellers in the Bible: Moses (Exodus), David (Ps. 78), Paul (Gal. 3-4), and Jesus Himself.

The disciples came up and asked, "Why do you tell stories?" He replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. (Matt. 13:10-13 The Message)

¹⁷Tom Steffren, *Storytelling: Why Do We Do It?*

¹⁸Michael Novelli and Cesar Kalinowski, *Biblical Storying: A Basic Training Workshop*, 2003-2004, 4.

¹⁹Ibid, 4.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... 32They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:27, 32 NIV)

What is The Goal of Storying?

The goal of Storying is to help us understand, experience, and intersect with God's story. In other words: "Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in 'the God story,' which always gets around to the story of God making and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the biblical stories are very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but inhabiting the story."²⁰

Can We Go Deep Enough With This Approach?

We must not forget that this approach uses the Bible as its curriculum and the Word of God is bottomless. Storying not only teaches us how to handle the Word of God, it also can help us learn the Word of God deeper in our hearts. Unlike conventional approaches and traditional curriculum (where the leader does all the talking and never really learns where his people are at emotionally, relationally, spiritually), Storying allows the leader to lay the Word of God in front of people and then let them respond. The leader can then listen to their responses and gain access to their hearts. In the Storying approach, the Word of God actually controls the discussion and things can often go real deep, real quickly.

²⁰ Eugene Peterson as quoted in Michael Novelli and Cesar Kalinowski, *Biblical Storying: A Basic Training Workshop*, 2003-2004, 12.

SHEPHERDING LIFE GROUP MEMBERS

Like the other sections of this handbook, this section is still a work-in-process. The following highlights some of our initial thoughts on the leader as a shepherd of his or her small group members.

Key Components in the Shepherding Process

1. Pray and ask God for insight.
2. Since we often will have co-ed groups, each group needs a male and female shepherd. Men shepherd men and women shepherd women.
3. Listen to what each person shares or doesn't share each week. This will help you focus on what you can talk with them about.
4. Make contact each week with each member of the group (e.g. phone call, coffee, Facebook).
5. Walk alongside group members through seasons of growth, which include tough times of crisis and testing. Help them to take the next step in their spiritual growth.
6. Give them honest feedback.
7. Focus on the key people in the group – those ready to grow and who are potential leaders. You can't meet with everyone as much as you might like, so choose wisely where you invest your time. Jesus spent most of His time developing His future leaders.
8. Ask for help from your coach or Life Groups Pastor.
9. Keep multiplication and outreach on the front burner.

What Should I Do During a One-on-One Meeting Time?

1. Meet in a casual and informal setting.
2. Seek to build a relationship with them. Get to know them. Ask them questions about their family, hobbies, work, schooling, etc.
3. Seek to discern what their development and care needs might be. Ask them what they envision their lives to be one year from now.
4. Love them for who they are and for you God made them to be.
5. Avoid trying to become a counselor and trying to "fix" them.
6. Always try to find something to affirm and encourage in their lives.
7. Remember you will likely not be able to consistently engage with every member of your group in a one-on-one setting. After meeting for a few months, you will begin to identify a few people in the group who are ready and eager to be developed. This doesn't mean, however, that you shouldn't touch base and stay connected at some level (e.g., call, e-mail, etc.) with your members each week.

COACHING LIFE GROUP LEADERS

The following is a brief introduction to a topic that will require much more attention as the ministry grows and the structure matures.

What is a Coach?

A Coach is simply a shepherd to Life Group Leaders. A Coach is committed:

1. To the spiritual success of their Life Group Leaders (I Thess. 1:7-9). A Coach is willing to do what it takes to develop their Life Group Leaders and their Life Groups.
2. To being an example to their Leaders (I Thess. 1:5-6). Coaches understand that what they do and how they live their lives is their real ministry to their Leaders.
3. To helping his or her Leaders understand their roles as shepherds to their Life Group members.

Examples of Shepherding in the Bible ²¹

David as the Shepherd of Israel

And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them. (Ps. 78:72 NIV)

- David looked out for the welfare of his people.
- David led with character.
- David led with skill.
- David knew his sheep.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 NIV)

- Jesus is good to His sheep.
- Jesus was willing to lay down His life for the sheep.

Peter as the Shepherd of the Early Church

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17 NIV)

²¹ Bill Donahue (editor), *Coaches Handbook*, Willow Creek Community Church, 1995, p. 6.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Pet. 5:1-4 NIV)

- Care for the sheep because of your love for Jesus.
- Shepherd willingly, not under compulsion, but as servants.
- Serve as an example for your flock.
- The crown of glory will be your reward.

Requirements and Role of a Life Group Coach²²

Basic Requirements for becoming a Coach:

Before a Life Group Leader can consider becoming a Coach, some experience is necessary. Those who want to serve as a Coach must:

- Show signs of being a growing disciple of Christ.
- Have a desire to train, encourage, and shepherd Leaders.
- Have experience in leading a Life Group through the stages of beginning, growing, and branching.
- Display evidence of gifts and abilities given by God for shepherding Leaders.
- Be a participating member of FBC.

Basic role of the Coach:

The role of a Coach is much like that of a Life Group Leader, but now the Coach is focused on Leaders instead of group members. A Coach is asked to:

- Provide care for Leaders.
- Develop Leadership teams.
- Support and expand the ministry (i.e., Help your Leaders' groups to branch; Help your apprentice to shepherd new groups).
- Select and raise up an apprentice Coach.
- Conduct meetings (i.e., Meet with all your leaders together to provide vision and direction; make visits to one of the small groups of your Leaders to provide affirmation and observe group dynamics; meet with your Leaders one-on-one to provide care and to develop them personally and in ministry.)

²² Ibid., 12.

GROWTH OF OUR LIFE GROUP MINISTRY

Becoming a Church Of Life Groups

Making a decision to become a church of Life Groups is just a beginning. We recognize that relational community can't be accomplished through Life Groups alone. Here are some of the key contributions that various FBC ministries are making to the work of growing people in Jesus through Life Groups:

- **Monthly Visitor Lunches** – Beginning this fall, FBC will start hosting regular visitor lunches. As part of the presentation, we will emphasize involvement in a Life Group and encourage each new member to get involved.
- **Membership Classes** – Life Groups are emphasized in each Class (101, 201, 301, and 401) and attendees are invited to get involved.
- **Group Link** – This will be offered periodically throughout the year for people considering joining a Life Group. The presentation allows attendees to learn more about Life Groups and allows our Life Group Leadership Team to get to know those attending so we can make the best match possible when they enter a group.
- **Lay-Counseling** – Sometimes people have particular issues that need to be dealt with outside of the Life Group environment. These can include issues like abortion recovery, sexual/physical abuse, marital problems, etc. Lay-counseling, support groups, or things like marriage mentoring can provide the intensive focus and expertise that isn't generally available in the Life Group.
- **Celebrate Recovery** – Celebrate Recovery is an FBC ministry that reaches out to the entire church and community. It deals with the hurts, habits, and hang-ups of people, but is best known as a Christian addiction recovery ministry. We recommend those with addictions get solidly into recovery before joining an FBC Life Group.
- **Youth and Young Adult Ministry** – Life Groups are an integral part of our Mid-School, High School, and College Ministries.
- **Local Missions** – We are beginning to develop strategies for which Life Groups can reach into our community with the Gospel.
- **Life Group Leaders Training** – This training is developed to train prospective leaders for Life Groups. We recognize that finding, recruiting, training, and coaching leaders is essential to the growth and future success of any small group ministry.

Life Groups Ministry Structure

We believe that a healthy church can be defined primarily by its relationships – with God and with others. As churches grow in size, people can become increasingly disconnected from each other and can end up falling through the cracks. Rather than close personal relationships, the list of acquaintances grows larger and more impersonal. It is sad, but true - people go unnoticed. Because they are no longer connected to others in any meaningful way, they suffer and so does their relationship with God. In larger churches, structures need to be consciously created which facilitate genuine relationships. FBC is creating such a structure to do our best to avoid this problem. It is a work in progress. The structure (as we know it so far) can be summarized as follows:

- Life Groups are the front-line of growth and mission at FBC. Each member of a Life Group must be supported and cared for by a trained and loving Life Group Leader.
- Those Life Group Leaders, in turn, must be encouraged and supported by a Coach who is experienced and able to mentor and care for them.
- These Coaches must, in turn, be trained, encouraged, and supported by a Coach's Shepherd.

Our goal will be to create a structure where the distance for any person in a small group directly to a pastor is as short as possible. We believe that with the right structure, even in a church of 2,000 or more, everyone can be as personally cared for as if they were in a small church of ten.

But it must be emphasized that the structure (whatever it may be) is not an end in itself. The organization of the church is meant to serve the organism – the living, dynamic, body of Christ. The structure is merely designed to bring about balanced and healthy growth in the church – numerical growth, growth in unity, growth into maturity as a community, growth into individual theological maturity, so the members are able to distinguish truth from error for themselves, growth into truth, speaking motivated by love, growth in dependence on Jesus as the Head of the church, and growth in mutual enrichment. When you stop and think about it, only Life Groups can help us grow in all these ways.

Why We Use Homes for Life Groups

There are certain benefits associated with using homes for our Life Groups. Here are four of them:²³

1. They are infinitely expandable (homes are everywhere).
2. They are unlimited geographically (you can minister to a wider area).
3. They demonstrate good stewardship as they release more money for ministry (i.e., the church doesn't have to pay to build, lease, or rent more space).
4. They facilitate closer relationships as people are more relaxed in a home setting.

²³ Rick Warren, *Ministry Toolbox*, Issue 220, August 17, 2005.

Multiplying New Life Groups²⁴

If we are going to be successful in recruiting and developing apprentices and multiplying groups, then we will need to cast a vision that will make people enthusiastic and committed to these things. If this vision-casting is neglected, the resistance to multiplying groups will prove too strong to overcome.

We are not concerned with multiplying groups as an end in itself. We want to increase the number of groups because we want to provide quality pastoral care and community life for those who are part of our church. As long as we have too few groups, FBC will fail to be as effective a church as we might be.

The primary vision emphasis, therefore, is that by multiplying groups we are able to increase our capability as a church to care for people and reach our community with the Gospel. When people are not involved in significant Christian relationships like Life Groups it greatly inhibits maturity in Christ. Currently, many people in our church fall outside this kind of caring and encouraging community. For these reasons, we consider it imperative to develop new leaders and expand the number of groups.

Casting a vision for multiplication should happen regularly within the group. Here are some suggestions for how you might cast this vision in a succinct way at appropriate moments in the group meeting:

1. Maturity through community - It's important to remind ourselves as a group from time to time that one of our goals is to multiply. Because we believe that people do not grow into Christian maturity apart from caring Christian community, we should desire to see our group multiply, so that FBC's circle of care can expand to include everyone from our ministry.
2. Importance of pastoral care - It's good to remember that one of our goals as a group is to grow new groups. Because FBC wants Life Groups to be the front-line of pastoral care, it's important the number of groups increase in order to provide for people coming into the church. The best way for new groups to begin is for currently existing groups to develop new leaders and start them.
3. Reaching newcomers - New groups attract new people. Old groups typically do not attract new people because individuals tend to feel closed out of them. When we multiply groups, which is a vision we need to keep before us, we not only create new groups, we also renew our group so that it is more open to newcomers. Newcomers are then able to receive the same benefits from group life that we receive.
4. Participation and size - Our group has grown to a size in which it's difficult for everyone to participate in the conversation in a substantial way. Yet, it's that ability to participate which gives value to our group experience. For that

²⁴Adapted from *Fellowship Group Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Version 2.0, 1997.

reason, and also because so many people at FBC don't have the opportunity to participate in groups at all, it is important that we give thought to multiplying our group.

Methods of Multiplication

The Life Groups Ministry Staff is still working through this issue. We do know that groups should be "branched" and not "split," and that they shouldn't just be arbitrarily divided down the middle. Relationships within the group need to be considered when branching.

Obstacles to Multiplication²⁵

- Emotional Obstacles. Multiplication is perceived as a potentially painful event – a "split" which will sever relationships. People want to stay together. We are not interested in ruthlessly disrupting beneficial relationships, either. There are ways of multiplying groups which enable individuals to stay together. The group also needs to learn that any group which fails to multiply will grow stale or die within one or two years. The leader must convince both himself and the group that multiplying is healthy for the group and for the Kingdom. As one sage put it, "Until people have gone through a couple of birthing generations they...don't feel they can separate because they don't have confidence in building relationships...Eventually, you get skills and confidence and know you can form new relationships and begin to realize that great benefit comes for many in birthing new cells (Life Groups)."²⁶
- Logistical Obstacles. Typically, a Life Group needs to meet at least 24 times to be "mature" enough to birth a new group. We are considering our groups branching, on the average, between 9-18 months.
- Leadership Obstacles. The main strangulation factor in a church's continued growth is development of new leaders. If the development of apprentice leaders is not a main priority, our hope of reaching and growing new disciples will be thwarted.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Carl George quoted in *Fellowship Group Handbook: A Manual for Leaders and Coordinators*, Version 2.0, 1997.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Life Group evaluation and assessment tools must be a necessary component of the Life Group Ministry if we are to measure our progress as a ministry, and as leaders. As Howard Hendricks writes: “Most people think experience is the name of the game, that the longer a person teaches, the better he or she gets. Nonsense. Just as ripping through wood dulls the teeth of a carpenter’s saw, so experience tends to wear away my edge. I have found one *evaluated* experience sharpens my skills. Evaluation hones the edge.”²⁷ These tools are currently a work in progress.

COMMON PROBLEMS LEADERS FACE

Any time you bring together a group of people with different backgrounds, histories, and personalities, conflict and problems are almost inevitable. The following addresses some of the more common problems and conflicts a leader will face.

Dealing with Criticism²⁸

The proper way to deal with criticism, backstabbing, or gossip, is clearly spelled out in Matthew 18:15–17. Let’s look at how this Scripture can be used to deal with a common problem: criticism of the church and its leaders. As a leader, you must deal with this problem before it gets out of hand. Use these talking points:

- Acknowledge the person’s problem or conflict with the church. However, as the group leader, express your total support of the vision and pastors of our church. Encourage the person to share their concerns with church leadership.
- If an individual has a problem with a specific leader, you should be prepared to invoke Matthew 18:15–17 by asking the question, “Have you talked to him or her about this issue? I would love to talk to you about this but Matthew 18 says you are to talk to them first before I can even discuss it with you.”
- If the person has followed Matthew 18 and gone directly to the person but nothing was resolved, then you’re to take two or three others with you for the next conversation. However, even at this point this is still not now or ever an open discussion for the group meeting.
- The same procedure applies when the criticism is of other people in the church or in the group.

Types of Disruptive Behavior²⁹

Disruptive people are those who, for a variety of reasons, want to make themselves the center of attention. These types can include:

²⁷ Howard Hendricks, *Mastering Teaching*, Multnomah Press, 1991, p. 105.

²⁸ “Dealing with Criticism,” *Smallgroups.com*.

²⁹ “Types of Disruptive Behavior,” *Smallgroups.com*.

- **The single person who has a history of dating the wrong people.** These people will use the group as their personal counseling session each week, and there is always a new issue or problem. There will also be people who are coming to the group to learn how to change so they can make better choices in the future. These people are worth the group's time.
- **The person who is very lonely or completely alone.** These people are usually great people. The problem is that the group is often the only thing they have in their lives, so they use it to talk about how unhappy they are. You may have to take this person aside and help them understand the impact they are having on the group. This can be a great time of personal and spiritual growth for this person. The group must stay positive and full of hope so lives can be changed.
- **The people who just like to hear themselves speak.** These people will overwhelm anyone who wants to talk and always have to top every story with one of their own. If you're not careful this person will be the only one talking every single week. People will grow weary of this and leave.
- **The person who shows no respect for the rest of the group.** This is the person who shows up late every week and disrupts the proceedings. This is selfish behavior and must be addressed. This is not a person whose schedule makes them late each week and comes in quietly and joins the group. Nor is this someone who is regularly on time but occasionally has disruptions come up.
- **The parents that allows their kids to run wild through the group.** Each group must have some sort of childcare arrangement. Even with childcare, a child will come in from time to time, so make sure each parent knows that if this happens, they are to quietly take the child away so the group can continue.
- **The person who will stay around for hours after everyone else leaves.** Have a starting and ending time. Hold your ground and tell everyone from day one that you need their cooperation.

God loves people and so should we. However, if these issues are not addressed and solved then the selfish or even legitimate needs of one person will destroy the needs of the rest of the group.

Confronting Disruptive Behavior³⁰

Disruptive behavior must be confronted for the benefit of the entire group. Most people don't want a confrontation so when issues like this aren't dealt with, they just leave and look for another group. Keep these points in mind:

- How a message is delivered sometimes can be more important than the content. A message delivered in love can help someone change. A message delivered in judgment will always be rejected.

³⁰ "Confronting Disruptive Behavior," *Smallgroups.com*.

- Confronting someone on an issue that is hurting your group is not easy. However, for the health of the group, and to grow your leadership, you must do it.
- People cannot change until they recognize that they need to.
- People will not change unless they want to. If the message is valid and delivered in love then how they respond to it is not your responsibility.
- Successful groups are those that work together as a team. They support each other, love each other and, many times, have to confront each other.

Answering Tough Questions³¹

One of the greatest fears any new Life Group Leader has is being asked tough questions that they don't know the answers to. When that happens, remember:

- No one has all the answers.
- Saying, "I don't know" is okay. But follow with, "I'll do my best to find that out for next week." You will find that your people will respect you for that honesty.
- Don't give an answer if you don't know the answer especially when it comes to the Bible. Giving the wrong answer is much worse than saying you don't know.
- Often leaders make honest mistakes and give a wrong answer. Be humble and admit you made a mistake. People will respect your humility and honesty.
- When you get a tough question and don't know the answer, research it yourself and see if you can find the answer. This process will grow you as a leader. If you are struggling, then consult your coach or pastor.
- When you come up with the answer make sure you discuss it in the group so everyone can grow from the exercise. Talk about the process of finding the answer.

Dealing with Group Conflict³²

Your group should look and feel like a community. Communities have all kinds of people from different backgrounds and personalities. When you bring a group like this together, you will eventually have some relational conflict. Here are ways to keep these tough issues from harming the group:

- **Disagreements about biblical issues.** Try to understand where someone comes from and why they feel the way they do about the issue. This may be one of those times when you have to say, "Let's get back to this next week" so you can be better prepared to address what the Bible says about the issue. Remember that if biblical scholars disagree on many issues, then people in your group will disagree from time to time as well. Trying to prove

³¹ "Answering Tough Questions," *Smallgroups.com*.

³² "Dealing with Group Conflict," *Smallgroups.com*.

who is right is a waste of the group's time. In these situations, change the focus to what we all agree on: the basic message of salvation through Jesus.

- **Disagreements about what the group should be.** Remember that you are called to lead this group. For you to be happy leading the group it must reflect who you are. If someone doesn't like the group as it is, then lovingly help them find a group that fits them better.
- **Dealing with tough family problems and issues.** Deal with these issues with love and care but be careful not to try to become a family counselor. Difficult issues usually require professional help. The group does not exist to counsel people through tough issues, it exists to love and support them while they're getting the professional help they need.
- **Dealing with relational issues in the group.** Conflict in the group must be resolved in the group. Let tempers settle down, talk about it before the next group, then come back and discuss it openly in the next meeting. There are times when the conflict isn't resolved and people have to agree to disagree on the issue while remaining friends. Sometimes it's better to find resolution outside the group, then come to the group and talk about the resolution.

As leaders, the best thing you can do is to establish healthy boundaries from the beginning. Make sure people do not come with an attitude of, "what can the group do for me." Instead, instill the principle that people are to come looking for what they can give to the group.

Dealing with Tense Moments³³

Tense or heavy moments are a natural part of group life and should not be ignored or avoided. When one group member experiences awkwardness or antagonistic feelings about a particular issue or exercise, other members may not know how to respond appropriately. Some will want to move onto something else. But this doesn't allow the group member to work through his reactions.

As a group leader (or member), you can help the rest of the group respond appropriately by keeping the attention focused on the individual. Reinforce a willingness to get involved in difficult issues – model empathetic listening. Help the hurting group member tune into what he is thinking and feeling. Allow him to vent his emotions, but then move on to allow others to express their reactions as well. Often the total pattern of group response to an exercise will give new perspective to everyone. The freedom to express negative, as well as, positive ones may help the group stay with the experience. This approach applies when a group member becomes very upset or breaks into tears. Let him or her cry. Encourage the exploration of what is behind the difficult area and let him or her know that you have heard what's been said. As you demonstrate a level of comfort with "embarrassing" emotions, other group members will feel more comfortable as well.

³³ The Small Group Letter, March 1988, 2.

Dealing with Silent Behavior ³⁴

Why are people silent? Here are some common reasons:

- They don't like to self-disclose. They fear that if they speak, they will be committed to further vulnerability.
- They fear hurting others. Some people are so concerned about feelings of aggression and anger that they remain silent for fear of verbally wounding others.
- Need to maintain control. Silence can be a lofty means of keeping the upper hand and expressing a sense of superiority. It can also be a form of manipulation.
- Fear of displaying weakness. For some, silence is a way to protect themselves from crying, appearing ignorant, or admitting failures.

Whatever the reason, silence is never silent. So what can we do with this behavior? The best approach is to steer a course between encouraging involvement on the one hand, and allowing the person some freedom to have times of silence, on the other hand. Here are four suggestions to consider:

1. Be especially attentive to a silent person's nonverbal communication. Watch for gestures or demeanor such as interests, tension, sadness, boredom, or amusement.
2. Encourage involvement. Say something like, "Would you mind telling the story next week?"
3. Learn something special about the person. When appropriate, share this information with the group to draw attention to the person's strength and to help him/her sense the group's appreciation.
4. Challenge members to build one-on-one rapport. The more the silent member feels a camaraderie with a least one member, the safer he or she will feel interacting in the group.

³⁴ The Small Group Letter, Discipleship Journal, 1988, 42.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

The following seeks to address some of the most frequently asked questions about FBC's Life Groups Ministry. We hope you find them helpful. If you have any additional questions, or if you would like to further discuss any of the topics addressed here, please don't hesitate to contact the FBC Life Groups Ministry Team. We would be glad to help wherever we can.

1. WHY LIFE GROUPS IN THE CHURCH?

In a nutshell, Life Groups are simply basic Christian communities – people who are seeking to do life together. Life Groups are where people come to know God and experience His presence; and where they come to know each other and cultivate community. In Life Groups, people learn what it means to love each other, encourage each other, serve each other, and challenge each other. Life Groups are not only places of belonging, they are places of becoming. They are relational environments where people are free to be real with one another – where a group of people can learn to live, love, and lead like Jesus. We believe the Scriptures clearly teach that small groups are biblical, life-changing vehicles for ministry, emphasized by Jesus Himself and embraced by the Early Church.

2. HOW DO LIFE GROUPS FIT INTO THE MISSION AND VISION OF FBC?

At FBC, we do not believe the church is a building or a program or some kind of spiritual clinic. We believe the church is God's people. To put it another way, we believe "we" are the church. And as the church, we don't want to be "organized religion!" We don't want to live for pious phrases and religious activity. We don't want to just know where we *fit* - we want to experience how we *fit together* in Christ. We want to experience in tangible ways how God can use us together for something far bigger than ourselves. We want to make an eternal difference for Him. We want to be passionate about building relationships and friendships, and sharing our lives together in gospel living. We want to better understand how we can do life together on mission with God, and then do it! And we believe one of the greatest connecting opportunities and catalysts for accomplishing all of this is the small group. This is why we want to become more than a church *with* Life Groups - we want to become a ministry *of* Life Groups.

3. WHERE DOES THE BIBLE TELL US TO ORGANIZE A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY?

When you think about it, can't the same question be asked about forming a youth ministry, or children's ministry, or choir, or you get the idea? Although the Bible does not command us to organize small group ministry, it does presuppose that a significant relational life exists within the church. Where this does not happen naturally, the church must cultivate it. Life Groups are FBC's chosen means of cultivating that relational life. Because of their foundational role in the life of our church, we hope that a great majority of our church and beyond will be involved in Life Groups.

4. WITH EVERYTHING THE CHURCH IS ALREADY DOING, WHY DO WE NEED TO ADD LIFE GROUPS TO THE MIX?

Life Groups exist in one form or another in every church, including ours. While many churches don't have declared Life Groups Ministries, people get into small groups regardless of whether Life (small) Groups are an "official" ministry or not.

Why? Because we naturally and automatically seek out relationships. We are wired by God for community. With Life Groups, FBC is simply becoming more intentional in helping people find ways to connect and grow in healthy, life-changing, relational environments.

5. HOW ARE LIFE GROUPS DIFFERENT FROM THE WORSHIP SERVICE?

Life Groups are different from large groups (e.g. worship service) in that they are usually more personal, relational, discussion-driven, and application-oriented environments. There are things you can do in Life Groups that you just can't do in large groups.

6. WHO WILL LEAD THESE LIFE GROUPS?

We believe the Bible clearly teaches that leadership is characterized by *ministry* and *service*. The one who is not willing to serve is not ready to lead. In Mark 10:45, Jesus set the standard when He said, "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (NIV). Leaders are those who pick up the servant's towel (John 13:1-17) and model the life, love, and leadership of Jesus with others. Those who lead FBC Life Groups will be those who meet specific qualifications and who have been trained to lead by serving and to serve by leading.

7. HOW IS LEADING A LIFE GROUP DIFFERENT THAN TEACHING A SMALL GROUP?

Leading a Life Group is an art in itself; it is different from either one-on-one ministry or teaching a class. On the one hand, the dynamics of a Life Group require you to pay attention to the group as a unit, carefully weighing the needs of different individuals against the goals for the group. On the other hand, because the group is small, your job is to facilitate rather than lecture, to lead people to discover the truth of God's Word for themselves.

8. HOW DO I KNOW IF I SHOULD LEAD A LIFE GROUP?

How would you answer these questions: 1) Does the idea of helping people grow in Jesus excite you? 2) Do you want to use your gifts for God? 3) Do you want to make an eternal investment with your life? 4) Are you willing to be trained and to grow yourself? If you answered yes to any or all of these questions, then you may have your answer. If it is "yes," then you also may want to contact an FBC Life Groups Ministry Pastor to get more information about becoming a Life Group Leader.

9. HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN EACH GROUP?

There is no magic number, however, 10-15 people in a group will be pretty common. This size of group seems to allow people to feel comfortable in the group, form deep connections within the group, and grow spiritually through the group, without getting lost in a crowd.

10. WHERE WILL THE LIFE GROUPS MEET?

They will meet throughout our community, many of them choosing to meet in homes. We encourage meeting in homes because: 1) They can facilitate closer relationships since people tend to be more relaxed in a home setting; 2) They can offer unlimited potential for growth (homes are everywhere); and, 3) They

can reflect good stewardship since they don't require us to buy, lease, or rent more space in order to meet together.

11. HOW OFTEN WILL GROUPS MEET?

Most will usually meet weekly throughout fall, winter, and spring. We recommend that groups take a break, or change their pace, for the summer months.

12. WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN COMING TO LIFE GROUPS? WHAT WILL EACH GROUP DO ABOUT CHILDCARE?

Each small group will decide how they will choose to handle children coming to their groups, as well as, childcare.

13. WHAT WILL THE LIFE GROUPS USE FOR THEIR CURRICULUM?

There are many different kinds of curriculum a Life Group can choose to use and an equal number of ways to present it. We are choosing to use the Bible as our curriculum and Orality, Storying, or Story-telling as our approach to learning and understanding it.

14. WHAT IS ORALITY, STORYING, OR STORY-TELLING?

Biblical Orality, Storying, or Story-telling is a sequential approach to sharing biblical truth that remains true to Scripture. It is taking a text or passage and telling it in context. It includes a time of dialogue and discovery after telling the story. In the dialogue, the person telling the story uses questions to guide listeners to discover the meaning and significance of the biblical story. Storying allows for the biblical stories to speak for themselves.

15. WILL WE BE ABLE TO GO DEEP ENOUGH WITH THE STORYING APPROACH?

We must not forget that Storying uses the Bible as its curriculum and we know that the Word of God is bottomless. Storying not only teaches us how to handle the Word of God, it also can help us learn the Word of God deeper in our hearts. Unlike conventional approaches and traditional curriculum (where the leader does all the talking and never really learns where his people are at emotionally, relationally, spiritually), Storying allows the leader to lay the Word of God in front of people and then let them respond. The leader can then listen to their responses and gain access to their hearts. In the Storying approach, the Word of God actually controls the discussion and things can often go real deep, real quickly.

16. WHAT IF I ALREADY ATTEND A SUNDAY MORNING CLASS?

That's fantastic! We don't want to ignore places where community is already happening within our church body. In addition to your class, if being in a Life Group can help you cultivate even more meaningful relationships and friendships with others, then try it.

17. WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO BE IN A LIFE GROUP RIGHT NOW? DO I HAVE TO ATTEND A LIFE GROUP TO BELONG HERE?

We respect your decision and are thankful to God you are here. And no, you certainly do not have to attend a Life Group to belong here. We do hope, however, you will find ways to connect with others here at FBC.

18. WHY SHOULD I GET INVOLVED IN A LIFE GROUP?

God created us for relationships and never intended for any of us to go at it alone. While there are many ways to answer this question, one sage captures it especially well when he writes: “Many very generous Christians find themselves increasingly tired and dispirited not so much because the work is hard or the success slight, but because they feel isolated, unsupported, and left alone...We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and persevere under many pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supporting, praying community, we quickly lose faith. This is because faith in God’s compassionate presence can never be separated from experiencing God’s presence in the community to which we belong.” To put it another way, one of the key reasons you should get involved in a Life Group is because everyone needs meaningful relationships and friendships in their lives, including you. Small groups offer a safe, comfortable, stress-free place where you can meet new people, make new friends, learn something new, and grow spiritually in a relational environment.

19. HOW DO I GET INVOLVED IN A LIFE GROUP?

There are several ways you can get involved in a Life Group: 1) Someone invites you to be a part of their group; 2) You request to be a part of a Life Group by signing up at the information counter during a Sunday service, or by writing your name and request on a Worship Service comment card, or by calling the church office (541-345-0341); and, 3) By pursuing training to lead a Life Group yourself (i.e., If this is the case, we welcome the opportunity to talk with you. Contact the Life Groups Ministry Pastor in order to meet together and discuss this possibility.)