

LIFE GROUPS

What Are Life Groups and Why Do They Matter?

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. - Romans 15:7

Christ Our Hope Church has three guiding principles: our mission, our vision and our ministry strategies.

Mission of Christ Our Hope Church: “To know and offer the power of Christ’s hope.”

Vision of Christ Our Hope Church: To be followers of Christ who are

- (a) Conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29, 1 Peter 1:13-16)
- (b) Courageous in living for Christ (1 Peter 1:17-21) and
- (c) Compelled to serve Christ (1 Peter 1:22).

Ministry strategies: Biblical Worship, Discipleship Education, Covenant Community, Empowering Mercy, and Intentional Outreach.

- The intent of the ministry strategies is to create Christians who resemble the Vision who pursue the Mission.

Each of our church’s ministries falls under one of the ministry strategies—this way, that ministry keeps its place in the larger work of the church. “Life Groups” are the primary means we pursue Covenant Community.

Covenant Community

An important question to answer to better understand the role of Life Groups at the church is, “What is Covenant Community and how does it compare to ‘community’?”

Covenant community reflects the character of the covenants of the Bible. In the Bible, covenants are “binding, governed relationships with parties, conditions and consequences.” Community founded on covenants is community built on and carrying the weight of promises. That is, it is one of people “binding” themselves

together by promises, governed by God’s law with built in blessings for obedience and discipline for disobedience.

Theologically, this means all who put their faith in Jesus Christ are in covenant community across all time and place. Practically at Christ Our Hope Church, this all begins as new members assent to the five vows of membership from our *Book of Church Order*.

The last three are especially relevant for covenant community:¹

3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will work to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace?

Covenant community is maintained by these last three vows of membership. They ask each member to work to maintain godly, biblical relationships with other church members for the good of the Church and glory of the Lord. In this community, there is accountability, encouragement for treating each other according to God’s word as well as failing to do so.

“Community,” by contrast, is a volunteer association of people around a shared goal or value—when *that* goal is met or *that* value is no longer shared, community dissolves naturally. While there may be some practical consequences for failing to live according to the community goals or values, submission to those consequences is person-by-person. In other words, no higher standard of accountability exists beyond the individual; therefore, “community” is ultimately very individualistic.

Marriage is the smallest example of human covenant community. It is begun and held together with vows before God. As husbands

¹ The first two have to do with commitment to Christ. 1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy? 2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?

and wives age, values change, opportunities change, seasons grow long—if marriage was simply a community, these types of things would force it to dissolve.² Yet, as a covenant, it is founded on something deeper and stronger: vows before God to live *not* according to worldly values or goals *but* according to God’s word. First John 4:7:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Life Groups

“Life Groups” are practical ways to live out covenant community at Christ Our Hope Church. While all in the church who take vows of membership are bound by those vows, Life Group membership and participation is one of the easiest ways to demonstrate covenant community.

Each Life Group is a regular gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ for fellowship, sermon discussion, and prayer. These meetings are meant to be incubators for covenant commitment to each other developing lasting relationships of encouragement and service.

Life Groups are distinct but related to other church ministries like Sunday School. As distinct ministries they follow distinct strategies (e.g., Sunday School is Discipleship Education). Yet. As related ministries they target the same vision (e.g., “Conformed to Christ”). This is important as most often a single ministry is either better at fostering education or better at fostering fellowship. A classroom is not always the best place to build friendships; a gathering in a living room is seldom the best place for academic teaching. Recognizing this, we have designed our Sunday School ministry to focus on discipleship education, while our Life Group ministry focuses on covenant community.

² Indeed, with the advent of “no-fault” divorce laws, breaking the marriage can be sought for any condition no matter how slight.

Culture.

Life Groups have historically been entry points for visitors to the church. While people enter the front doors and worship the Lord in our liturgy, it is (most) often the case that people will find their way into membership because of vibrant covenant community—often found in Life Groups. This is where the culture of our church—of real welcome and love and commitment to Christ and His people is grown and extended.

We are thankful to the Lord that our church is a place where people can come and be known. It's a place where members will notice each other and visitors and will ask what's going on in life. This doesn't just happen on Sunday mornings; that same spirit of hospitality is continued and enlarged throughout the week through our Life Group ministry.

Shepherding.

Life Groups are also an important part of our shepherding ministry at Christ Our Hope Church. Each group is led by a trained leader (usually an elder or deacon) who helps to organize the group and facilitate discussion. When there is a service need within the group (like a sick family member), the Life Group is the first place where meal-shares and other practical help can be organized. Each group is also linked with a Shepherding Elder: an Elder of the church who is assigned to pray for and be a resource to the members of the Life Group and their families.

Because church members have different needs and schedules, we have groups that meet on various days of the week. Some groups meet weekly, while others meet two times a month. We also have groups that meet in various places around the Wake Forest, Rolesville, and Youngsville area. It is our hope that each member family will be able to find a group that will fit their schedule and location.

Each group is a bit different based on the personalities involved in the group, but the commitment to covenant community is the same throughout the ministry. Meetings are organized around

fellowship, sermon discussion, and prayer. Sermon reflection questions based are provided in the bulletin each week and can be used to prepare for group meetings. These questions focus on applying the truths of God's word to daily life and relationships.

Spiritual Discipline Development.

Life groups are also a great place to use and grow in spiritual gifts.³ In sermon discussions, there are opportunities to share personal experiences and wisdom. As we pray together, we grow in faith and intercession. By meeting in various homes, we exercise hospitality. When needs arise, there are opportunities for mercy and service. Members also encourage one another to serve in other areas of the church and community for God's glory.

Life Group Values

There are seven values that are particularly important for our Life Group ministry.

#1: Community. As we've mentioned, Life Groups are the easiest way to know and be known on a deeper level than on Sunday mornings. Regular interactions with a smaller group of people allow members to build lasting relationships that encourage us together to seek Christ and His glory. Relational connections happen within other ministries of the church (serving teams, Bible studies, etc.), but Life Groups are our ministry specifically targeting covenant community development.

#2: Hospitality. Community grows in a welcoming environment. It's important to remember the difference between Entertaining and Hospitality. Entertaining is often about impressing others with our stuff; Christian hospitality is all about helping others feel welcome and comfortable.

#3: Curiosity. The content of our group discussion should be driven by curiosity, that is, a desire to know one another and to

³ Specific gifting areas are pursued using the Prophet, Priest and King assessment given during the new member class.

know Christ. We have a loving eagerness to know how God is at work in the lives of others. So the sermon discussion questions are less focused on “re-learning” the content from Sunday and more focused on reflection, personal sharing, and life application.

#4: Practical Care. As mentioned, for short-term, low-impact needs, the Life Groups are the first place where we have the opportunity to care for one another in meaningful, practical ways. Groups are the first point of care in the church and the access point for broader and more long term help provided by the Deacons or Deacon Assistants and Shepherding Elder.

#5: Prayer and Praise. Knowing more about others should easily flow into both prayer and praise. This is the vertical aspect of community growth. We celebrate together the ways that we see God doing good in our lives and in the lives of others. We also pray and bring before the Lord the needs that we see anxious for more opportunities to give Him future praise.

#6: Gift-Development and Deployment. This can also be seen as Spiritual Encouragement and is the horizontal aspect of community growth. As we get to know one another better, we discover passions and abilities that God may use for His glory in each person’s life. The Life Group provides a great opportunity to begin to use those gifts to serve others and to offer suggestions on how those gifts can be used in the broader community.

#7: Multiplication. See below.

Multiplication

The natural life cycle of a successful Life Group includes multiplication. Life Groups are designed to be places where people grow in their knowledge and love of Christ, in relationship with others, in spiritual gifts and in service—with God’s blessing, they are treasured meetings!

As each member deepens in faith and love, in the same way, we want to see our groups *themselves* multiply. We want these groups to have a spirit of hospitality and welcome and a desire to share the good blessings of Jesus with more and more people. As we welcome new people into our church, we have the privilege of showing them the blessings of a covenant community—particularly in Life Groups.

Yet as groups grow, however, there are real challenges that arise. Such as:

1. Loss of relational intimacy—increasing numerical size leads to decreasing intimacy and privacy
2. Diminished effectiveness in prayer—larger groups mean less prayer and potentially less meaningful prayer
3. Lessened fruitful sermon discussions—all the opinions and wisdom of the group is lost to only a few who are willing to speak up
4. Challenging logistics: hospitality, meeting place, child care needs—larger groups struggle to find places to meet, costs increase

As our church grows, Life Groups **must** multiply as they are the most effective strategy to reproduce the covenant community of our church. Life Groups must have a mindset of multiplication.

Process of multiplication

The method of multiplication is very important. Since we are trying to reproduce effective covenant community, new groups should form from an established group. We call this “group multiplication,” and it has several advantages over starting groups from scratch.

1. It allows us to honor the relationships that have already been established, allowing many of them to continue into the new groups. The new groups are then “branches” off the former group.
2. These invested relationships carry forward the life group culture into new groups so there is a “relational momentum” as new people are added to the group.
3. The new leader has already had opportunities to build experience as a co-leader.

How might this work? In at least two related ways.

First, by “Sending.” This is where the whole group has become so large that two new groups can readily be made with the leader and co-leader each taking one of the groups. Members that already have an affinity for one another or for one of the leaders will join that new group. New people are then welcome to join either of the smaller groups.

Second, by “Seeding.” This is when a co-leader asks a few members of the established group to join in starting a new group. Usually this group has a particular view towards integrating new attendees to the church, or those who are otherwise not currently involved in a Life Group.

Renewal

With our goal of multiplying new groups and because work and family schedules often shift from year to year, our groups are organized around a two-year time interval that culminates in our “Renewal” season.

At the end of two years of regular meeting, the pastoral staff and Life Group leaders convene to discuss the status of Life Groups. This meeting typically happens in early Fall. At this time, large groups will seek to multiply either by Sending or by Seeding. Current members of groups will be asked to pray about continuing in their groups or joining to form new ones.

Questions often arise during the Renewal period.

“Must I leave my group?”

Maybe! If groups grow (as we hope), the losses mentioned above will happen: intimacy, prayer, sermon application. In order to continue to build covenant community through the entire church, we ask all members to be prayerfully ready to join a new group during the Renewal period.

“How will it work to commit to a group knowing it may change in two years?”

Putting a time limit on things can be freeing *and* constraining. With the two year window, a group member should be ready to invest himself in the group in every way—time is short!

When a Life Group membership changes, that *doesn't* mean relationships built in the Life Group have to end or should end—they can and should continue on outside of the Life Group meetings.

Keep in mind: Life Groups are a means to covenant community for the *entire* church. Like church planting, the kingdom is to grow and at times that means smaller groups sacrifice for the larger kingdom mission.

“If circumstances arise, can I leave my current group and join another?”

Yes. All that is required is a conversation with the pastoral staff at any time.

While a larger group may be ready to multiply at any time during the ministry year, the Renewal period can be an ideal time for a group to multiply. As the Fall season comes to a close, we will ask members to commit to their groups (current or new) so they can grow in intentional and invested relationships.