

LIFE GROUPS

A SMALLER FAMILY WITHIN A BIGGER ONE

HOPE CHAPEL
LIFE GROUP/SMALL GROUP
INTRO LEADER TRAINING MANUAL

Exercise Care & Foster Transformation

What are life groups?

Life Groups at Hope Chapel exist to 1) Exercise Care and 2) Foster Transformation. It provides a safe place for people to share life and faith with one another.

Life Groups spend time studying the Bible, often eating together, praying for one another, and sharing life experiences. We believe Life Groups is a great place to live out your faith. You'll find a smaller family within a bigger one at Hope.

Why be in a Life Group?

We were designed for relationships. We were called to be more like Jesus. At Life Groups, both come together.

There are various tools that God uses to grow us spiritually. Think about when you grew closer to God. It was perhaps through "Pivotal Circumstances" in life or when you heard "Practical Teaching" from God's Word or someone was there as a "Providential Relationship" to offer biblical counsel or you went and served others in "Personal Ministry" or you practiced "Spiritual Disciplines" such as prayer or fasting with God¹. These can happen in Big Church Services/Events as well as in Small Group Gatherings. In the Bible, it was called "in the temple courts" and "in house to house."

Sitting in a small group allows you to talk about how to apply God's wisdom to your life. Not just hearing about it. ***Spiritual growth often happens through trusted relationships and trusted relationships are built over time and with effort.*** Sometimes this happens quickly. Other times, it can take a lot longer especially if you only meet twice a month.

Here's what we believe you can expect from Life Groups:

- 1) *You will feel more like you belong to the Hope Chapel family and to the body of Christ.*
- 2) *You will feel supported in the stresses of life.*
- 3) *You will get opportunities to love and live out the over 40 "one another" commands in the New Testament. (i.e. Pray for..., Encourage..., Carry the burdens of..., Rejoice with..., Weep with...)*
- 4) *You will grow in your understanding of God, His Word, and His Work.*
- 5) *You will meet new people that could potentially be long life friends.*

How long will I be a part of this Life Group?

We think it is good when people sign up for the same group year after year. It often takes time to share your real life stresses and circumstances with others. However, we also think it is healthy to make changes, meet new people, and experience Christianity from different angles. Therefore, we open up Life Groups for realignment typically around September. It's a great time to start in a group or continue in the same group you were last year.

Joining a group can feel awkward at first. And it can be difficult to share life with those who aren't quite like you. Remember that following Christ is a lifelong stretching of those uncomfortable spiritual and personality muscles. So plan on making at least a year commitment. We certainly understand when people can no longer participate due to unforeseeable changing circumstances.

¹ (Adapted from Andy Stanley "5 Things God Uses to Grow our Faith").

How much is this going to cost and what do I do with kids?

Most groups purchase inexpensive Bible study materials 2-3 times a year. However, we do not want money to stand in your way of growing in a Life Group. Please allow us to help cover the cost if needed. If you need to purchase a leader pack, please allow the church to purchase it for you so we can also include it in our "Resource Library."

Some groups have no children while other groups deal with childcare differently. Some groups can allow for the children to manage themselves in another part of the house. Some groups pitch in to hire a child care provider. The key here is that everyone chips in because everyone benefits.

What makes for a good Life Group?

People come from all walks of life and church experience. People are in different life stages and life experiences. Sharing life with someone different than you can be beneficial and can be frustrating. It can be hard to find someone to understand exactly what you're going through. **Geography places a big role in a group's success.** Having people who live close together helps in general. If someone is traveling more than 20 minutes to get to a Life Group, you may not see them very often, especially if they have young kids or they don't like driving when winter comes.

A good life group is when the group is full of the kind of people you would like to lead. If you struggle to lead the group as the leader, the group will most likely struggle to succeed as a whole and each individual will struggle to grow. Figure out what kind of people will make a good group in your mind. Identify the kind of people gets under your skin. How much of a relationship can you build with people of different life stages? Also, figure out what style of Life Group will you feel most comfortable leading? Is it a group focused just on Bible Study or on Mission Outreach? What is your personal spiritual growth habit? As much as you also need to challenge other ways to grow spiritually, you may also find it easier to lead when you are in your known element. This will affect how well you think your Life Group is doing.

What types of resources are available to lead a Life Group?

Groups are somewhat self-governing in what they study. Many groups will follow the recommendation of the leader so you will need to be prepared with some options for your group. Some groups study straight from the Bible year round. Some groups like a mixture of Bible and Christian literature. **Keep in mind that there is usually a Life Group wide study once a year. The recommendation is that every group focuses some portion of each group's meeting opening up their Bibles and that each group would spend at least one series studying the Scriptures directly.**

If you have a resource that you would like to use but want pastoral opinion and "approval," please do not hesitate to ask.

RightNow Media: The church subscribes to a video-based resource of bible studies and topical studies. It is available free to any attender of Hope Chapel. If you do not have a login, please request one from the church office. Some of the studies have downloadable guides while others you will need to purchase materials.

Bible Studies Guides: There is no shortage of Bible study guide publishers. There are samples from many publishers in the church office. Take a look at what style may be more useful to your group. Some have basic questions while others include brief commentary and cross references.

Used Studies and Study Samples: There are sample study guides that are sent from Lifeway publishing in the church office. They range from Bible studies to topical studies for women, men, parenting, etc. We would need to order the Leader Kit with DVDs if you find something that interests you. There are also DVD resources that groups have used in the office.

Alpha Room Library: There are commentaries and books available in the Alpha Room library to strengthen your study or get further ideas about study materials.

ROLES OF A LIFE GROUP LEADER

One common word often associated with a small group leader is a facilitator. ***A facilitator is someone who helps the group accomplish its objectives by helping each member gain participation, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility.*** That often boils down to someone who will make the final decision on the study topic, communicate to the group about its meetings, and ask questions to get the group talking about the subject matter. But being a Life Group leader is more than that. ***In reality, LG Leaders are also Leaders, Teachers, and Shepherds****.

Leader

You hold influence in your hand. ***No matter how much responsibility you want to not put on yourself for the group, the group looks to you for direction, instruction, and opinion. How you lead the group helps shape and design the group.*** You help shape the group into a Bible study group, or a Social group, or a Service group, or a Prayer group, or a Life Group. This may be an area that you have to work at the hardest. You're responsible for keeping the group focused on its mission. Life Groups spend time studying the Bible, often eating together, praying for one another, sharing life experiences, and serving the community with service projects or in church-wide outreaches. As the leader, you promote these in the group. That's why we also want to ensure that our leaders are members of Hope Chapel and support all the ministries and efforts of the church. If you as the leader can't support and back up the direction and efforts of Hope Chapel's ministry leaders and staff, then being a Life Group leader may not be for you. You set an example for them to follow. They watch how you spend your time, how you serve, how you relate to your spouse, what you say about Hope, etc.

Shepherd

The Old Testament patriarch Jacob complained to his father-in-law about the harsh conditions he endured as a shepherd when he said, "There I was-- the heat consumed me by day and the frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes" (Gen 31:40 HCSB). ***You are a shepherd as you are watching and caring over the people in a life group.*** You get to see firsthand when FAITH meets LIFE, HOPE happens. You get to see their struggles and their growths. As a shepherd, you work on getting to know each person a little better and find ways to get the whole group to serve, to pray for, and to encourage one another. You visit them in the hospital. You cheer them on at celebrations. You laugh and have fun with them. This is what makes multiplying into new groups hard because the group has become close to one another. Life group leaders cannot be just facilitators of study questions at group meetings.

Teacher

Being a teacher often brings in thoughts of lecturing in a class of people sitting in rows taking notes or filling in blanks. Listening does not automatically equal learning. ***Learning often involves giving the "student" time to talk, process, and find ways of applying the truth. The "teacher" helps bring out that process for each person in the group.*** It's the role of the teacher to often select the source of learning and to ensure that the group is accurately understanding the material. The primary material for Life Groups is the Scriptures. Other resources that aid in understanding God can be used by the groups, but the teacher should always encourage the group to go back to the Bible and discover it for themselves. Every person should open up their Bibles every time the group meets to learn. Also, as a teacher, you are modeling for the group how to teach. A good teacher teaches others to teach. Allow others to lead the group and encourage them to be a Life Group leader as new groups are forming.

**adapted from "3 Roles for Guiding Groups" by David Francis and Ken Braddy*

10 KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP

1. Make the environment and yourself welcoming.

Have plenty of lights on (both inside and out). Check the temperature of the room. Ensure the room is comfortably arranged. Greet them at the door. Be prepared before they arrive. Treat every meeting like your first.

2. Start a semi-closed and committed group for a season of time.

Starting new or again brings excitement. Semi-closed groups hinder people joining randomly. Confidentiality is hard to build if new people are joining mid-season. Committed people will keep the group focused and going with excitement. Setting an end date helps keep the group fresh and allow new people to join when you start back up.

3. Start on time and end on time.

Starting late and ending late creates a new subconscious timeline. You'll begin to have people show up when they think it really starts. You'll begin to have people not coming because they can't stay as late as the group really is.

4. Get agreement on the agenda.

Be aware of those that want to set the agenda and mood for you and the group at that moment. Not having an agenda could also leave people feeling unfulfilled, lethargic, and unexcited. Some groups enjoy writing out a covenant and group rules. Reading the Bible on a weekly basis and serving together a couple times a year should be top priority.

5. Get others involved.

This is more than just getting them to answer your questions. Let others pick the study topic, where the group will serve, who communicates to the group, who leads the discussion, who can host the group, or who's bringing the snacks.

6. Build relationships.

People want to know you care about them. You want people to care about you. People who care about each other make a better group. Building relationships take more time than groups often allow. Connect with them outside of group time.

7. Have fun together.

Bible study and fun can go together. If you're boring, your study will be boring. Enjoy it and enjoy being with them. Some group enjoy game nights or time out doing something fun together.

8. Serve together.

Bonding together is well done when you're sweating together and doing something for someone else. If not, the group may tend to become inward focused.

9. Eat together.

Great conversations happen around food. And those who don't like talking, can blame their mouths being full.

10. Pray together.

It's easy to lose track of time with all the agenda. Be a critic about ending study time to give plenty of time to prayer. Even take a whole meeting devoted to prayer occasionally. Praying for one another is a basic spiritual discipline.

10 COMMON ERRORS IN LEADING GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Too little control.

Explain what you expect the group to do. You are in charge. Don't hesitate to bring the discussion back if it gets too far off the topic.

2. Too much control.

If the group "takes off" don't worry as long as it is in a direction you want to go. You may need to step in from time to time to clarify the direction.

3. Asking a question which can be answered either "Yes" or "No".

Learn to ask "What", "Why", "Where", "When" and "How" questions. Simple questions don't often cause interest in the discussion.

4. Asking too complex a question.

State the question simply and clearly. Start off with easy questions or set a question in context.

5. Being afraid of silence after asking a question.

Don't be impatient and don't launch into a lecture to fill the void.

6. Immediately answering a question directed to you.

Learn to kick the question back to the group. Ask, "What does someone else think about this?" After the group has participated, either affirm their answer or handle the question directly. (Don't be the answer man.)

7. Being afraid to admit you don't know the answer.

Be honest. Do your best to find the answer and bring it to the next meeting.

8. Limiting yourself to asking questions and leading.

The leader is also a participant in the group. Share your observations but do not dominate the study.

9. Tending to stress your own personal application.

The leader should not expect the rest of the group to be impressed deeply with the same things that deeply impress him. Remember, God meets us where we are.

10. Being too concerned with getting through the material.

Be open to the moving of the Spirit and the needs of the group. There are times when the lesson must be laid aside in order to follow the Spirit's leading or minister to someone in the group.

10 SIGNS THE GROUP NEEDS SOMETHING NEW

1. If you cancelled the group for the day, no one seemed to be upset about it.

Of course there are times when many members of the group has something going on, but if several people always miss and you wish you could miss one too...

2. Members aren't studying or doing their "homework."

Some members enjoy just listening. But remember that listening does not always equal learning. Perhaps there is a lack of excitement about studying God's Word. This should be troublesome. There may be something going on. Investigate.

3. Prayer time is minimal. No one seems to be sharing prayer requests/praises.

If there is nothing to pray about or nothing to praise about...it's time for us to be challenged, to sacrifice, to sell all we have and give to the poor.

4. Group members don't talk to one another outside of group meetings.

Group members don't have to be best friends, but we should see group members emailing, texting, or sitting with one another in church, etc.

5. Group hasn't invited someone new to the group for the past 18-24 months.

We want closed groups for the first year, but if the group stays beyond that, there needs to be awareness of how to reach others.

6. No one else in the group has been willing to lead or host the group.

Not all members will be future group leaders, but members should be challenged the lead a session. When you lead you are more likely to study harder and think about the subject matter more in depth.

7. Groups aren't finding ways of serving one another or to serve together in the community.

When's the last time you served together? Has it really been that long?

8. The same people pray every meeting.

Not everyone will feel comfortable praying in public, but when they do...it's powerful.

9. Group hasn't met together just to have fun together.

I'm serious...Don't be so serious.

10. Kids complain when it's group time.

Stagnation is like a disease. The kids will feel it. You can feel it in the air. Or they've heard mommy and daddy complain about group time before ;)

10 WAYS TO GIVE NEW LIFE TO THE GROUP

1. Give yourself and the group a break. Be honest with the group and allow them to make a decision about the group.
2. Spend time worshipping together.
3. Multiply the group, start a new group, invite new people into the group.
4. Talk about re-establishing goals and expectations of the group. Decreasing the commitment does not often lead to increased growth. Answer: Why do you meet?
5. Create get-togethers with other groups.
6. Study something that the group hasn't studied before. Old Testament prophet? Biblical person? Doctrinal topic? Cultural issue: homosexuality, divorce/remarriage, or women in church leadership?
7. Meet at different places such as in a park or at a restaurant.
8. Go on a prayer walk around a neighborhood or mission that you desire to reach for Christ.
9. Adopt a short term ministry job at the church together such as landscaping, deep cleaning, or serving food to the teens for a month.
10. Get the kids involved in group study, fellowship time, worship, prayer time, and service projects.

DIFFICULT ISSUES FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

What to do with those that dominate the discussion?

As a general rule, cutting short someone's comment or acting uninterested or looking at your watch is counter-productive to the open, sharing atmosphere that you want to maintain in any group study. You want talkers, you need talkers. If you decide to interrupt them, others may feel that you just want short answers from everyone in order to fulfill your agenda of the time. You may actually cause them and others not to share on a deeper level. However, there are times that the group members were hoping you'd interrupt them long time ago. Others may not share now knowing the group needs to move on.

Interrupting may be necessary. Be gentle about your approach. Acknowledge that you heard them. Even summarize what they said. Say, "I apologize. I just want to give everyone a chance to share and end as close to our time as possible for those who really can't stay extra." If possible, ask them a follow up question after the meeting to emphasize that you are interested in their participation.

You could also pre-select those who answer, or ask the question differently, such as: "in one or two sentences, what do you think is the one thing about _____?" Also try positioning the talker next to you when you begin your group, which reduces eye contact when you ask a question.

If need be, talk to them privately about trying to keep their answers short or wait for 2 others to talk first. They may have to write down a note on what they want to say so they aren't just thinking about what they want to say and can truly listen to other people share.

What to do with those that side track?

Some people come to the group unprepared and still want to participate, so they will find a way to participate. Some are easily distracted or uninterested in the discussion that they just start talking about something unrelated. Some people have an agenda they want to talk about now. (*See Discussion Dominators above or Grumblers and Debaters below*). Some people will have sudden life issues that they really want/need to share and are trying to figure out how to bring it up.

If it is a life issue, then you need decide if you are going to ignore it for the moment or bring your study to a halt in order to help this person now. Your group needs to be flexible and okay with pausing the study to put the matter to prayer. However, beware of those who have chronic crisis (*see below*).

In general, be okay with going down a rabbit trail sometimes, but take control and bring the group back on focus. Set a pattern of staying on target.

What to do with those that don't talk?

Some people just enjoy listening and learning. Some find the questions too easy and don't want to give the pat response. Some find the questions too hard to understand. Some need longer time to reflect and respond. Some don't feel they truly get heard, so why talk at all? Sometimes the introverts stay quiet because the extroverts are always talking.

Try to understand why they aren't participating. Connect with them after the group to discover what they are interested in or their answers to a particular topic. Encourage them to share those things with the whole group as a safe place to share. Also try positioning him/her across from you when you begin the group, which increases eye contact when you ask a question. Do an application question where everyone in the circle responds. Give them time to think and respond. Say to the group, "no one answer, just think for a minute, then we'll go around and share."

What to do with those in chronic crisis?

Some people seem to be always in a crisis and they often try to dominate the discussion. Asking "how are you doing?" is a request to join another step in their downward spiral of despair and disaster. They may even show up only when things are not going well.

Let them know that everyone will get a chance to share during prayer time. Talk with them outside of the group, letting them know that the group wants to help, but may be unequipped to provide the proper help needed. Suggest some resources to help such as counseling, an accountability group, or a support group.

What to do with those that grumble and debate?

Some people see small group as a time to vent (a.k.a. gossip) and let people know their complaint. Some tend to see the negative side to every issue, and often say, "yeah, but..." Some seem to always have the correct perspective, the best solution, and the truest interpretation.

Encourage them that many things are not so black and white. Ask them and the group: "In what circumstance would you not think that to be true?" Start off prayer time by asking for only praises and thanksgivings. Talk with them outside the group and let them know that their answers are insightful, but they may be stifling others from sharing for fear they may not have the "correct" answer. Always stop gossip immediately and tell them to go to the source of their issue (Matthew 18). Gossip often looks like a prayer request, but leads towards tearing down of people or programs, rather than a humble seeking of solutions.

What to do with those that always come late?

Some people come straight from work or other events causing them to be late. Some people want to make sure they are not the first ones there. Often times, these are those that have an issue of sharing their real lives with one another. Some people just don't think they are missing much if they come late and want to just be there for the "important" stuff.

Don't create a habit of starting once everyone shows up. Start on time. Don't create an environment that the beginning is a negotiable. Many groups have a social time at the beginning. This is an important time. If they miss this time, watch out for them trying to get "caught up" on a story during prayer time. If you put the emphasis on both start and end time, you

emphasis that the group isn't a come and go when you want group. Of course, we also want to be gracious and attentive to when group time needs to go longer.

What to do with those that don't come consistently?

You can expect to have people in your group that don't always make it to the group. This is frustrating and discouraging as a leader, especially if they are a big contributor to the group. Approach this in two ways. First, don't make the group feel less of a group because of those who couldn't make it. Embrace the group no matter the size this time.

Second, emphasize to the group that everyone should be concerned about reaching those that aren't there. Many groups always have an empty chair representing those who still need to be invited into a community of faith. Some meetings may have more than one empty chair. Encourage the group to reach out to those who couldn't make it. Those that missed it expect you as a leader to reach out, but it would mean something special from someone else.

When do I let a pastor know what's going on with people in my group?

Confidentiality is one of the main reasons people begin to share their lives with others. And life groups are fairly autonomous and responsible to help shepherd one another through daily life. However, there are occasions when the troubles or circumstances could use a greater resource, such as more people helping or personal counseling. And the pastoral staff may not be aware of the situation. You don't have to try to figure it out yourself. You should encourage the person to talk to a pastor about finding some help or ask if they would want you to talk to a pastor about it. Ensure them that confidentiality is a high character value among the staff. However, confidentiality is not a promise to be kept if someone is hurting themselves or hurting others.