

Laurel Life Group Plan

We believe that becoming a church of small groups is an effective way to be the 1st Century church in the 21st Century.

Being a church of small groups will help us:

- Serve one another more effectively and more naturally.
- Have a safe, comfortable place for members to share and heal.
- Apply scripture to real life more effectively.
- Practice the “one another” passages of the New Testament daily.
- Evangelize more effectively through relationships rather than through programs.
- Develop a true sense of community through strong relationships.

The Plan:

- Our Sunday morning schedule remains typical of many churches: Sunday School followed by a worship assembly.
- We don't have an assembly at the building on Sunday evenings. All of our members are encouraged to be in a Life Group
- We don't want to be a church that “does small groups.” We want to be a church “of small groups.” That means that much of our ministry will be done through our Life Groups. It also means that Sunday evening Life Group meetings have to have scheduling priority over all other church activities.
- Wednesday evening remains much the same except that students in grades 3-6th would be in the Timothy Class or Polished Cornerstones which will meet on Wednesday during class time rather than on Sunday as they currently do.

Pulpit-Based

Our Life Groups will be pulpit-based. Simply put, that means the Life Groups study the same material as presented in the Sunday morning sermon. Study guides will be prepared and distributed to the group leaders/members each week. This approach has several advantages:

1. It eliminates the struggle of group leaders to come up with something to study.
2. It helps make the Sunday sermon come alive in the lives of members. Application on Sunday evening of verses studied on Sunday morning will contribute to life-transformation.
3. It eliminates the worry of not knowing what's going on in the groups.

How it works:

1. Each Sunday morning there is a listing of all groups (times, locations, leaders, and phone numbers) on the back of the bulletin.
2. Group leaders will use Sunday mornings to invite our guests to participate in their Life Groups that evening. This contributes to a more welcoming atmosphere by ensuring that all visitors are welcomed/invited multiple times.
3. Group leaders will report attendance numbers via email no later than noon on Monday. Any groups that meet later than Sunday evening will need to report their attendance within 24 hours of their meeting.

What a Typical Group Meeting Looks Like:

A Life Group meeting will last 60-75 minutes (plus fellowship time) and will typically include the following elements:

1. Singing (Approximately 10 minutes)
2. Collection of prayer requests (sing a 'prayer journal' is encouraged)
3. Discussion of text/sermon points (15 minutes)
4. Sharing/Application of lesson (25-30 minutes)
5. Prayer (10 minutes)—prayer time could be together (led by the men) and sometimes it could be with men and women separate.
6. Fellowship time—Depending on the group, there might be no food served, a light snack served or a light supper (sandwiches, soup or other easy to prepare food). Other groups might choose to eat lunch together after the morning service and then meet in the afternoon for their group meeting.

Formation and Duration of the Groups:

1. In late August, sign up sheets are posted for members to select their group. Group members will not be assigned. Everyone is free to choose where they participate.
2. Group size will initially be limited to about 12 individuals.
3. Groups will run from September to mid-June with approximately 8-10 weeks off from mid to late June until mid-September.
4. New Groups will be formed each year in September.
5. Groups will meet weekly with the exception of the third Sunday evening when everyone will meet at the building for worship.
6. We currently offer groups for adults without children, adults with children and for teens.
7. Groups will be formed with children and no children options. ***Anyone who signs up for a group with kids automatically commits to taking their turn teaching the children.***
8. Groups will have a leader and an assistant leader. Assistant leaders are expected eventually to lead a group of their own.
9. Groups are formed with the explicit intention of multiplying and forming new groups as a part of our growth. When a group reaches a consistent average attendance of 18, plans need to be made to multiply the group into two groups.

Leader selection and training:

1. No one will be allowed to lead or co-lead a group without going through our Life Group leadership training class. *No Exceptions.*
2. All leaders must be approved by the elders and/or the Life Group coordinator.
3. At least one group leader from each group is expected to attend a Life Group leaders meeting. These meetings may be monthly or bi-monthly. This is a part of the commitment we expect of group leaders.
4. These monthly or bi-monthly training sessions will include:
 - Celebrating victories and discussing problems
 - Review a list of new members to be sure they are in a group and to make sure a couple of group leaders invite new members who are not in groups to join theirs.

- Additional training for group leaders.
- Prayer for groups.
- Keep the vision of what groups can do for our congregation in front of the leaders.

Questions and Answers:

1. Q: Is this scriptural?

A: Absolutely! The early church met “in the temple courts and from house to house.” (Acts 5:42; see also Acts 2:46; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Philemon 2; Colossians 4:15). Meeting together and in homes is closer to what the First Century church actually did than what we currently do. Our current tradition of meeting at a church building twice on Sundays actually goes back only about 50 or 60 years in most places. It is a tradition.

2. Q: What about control? How will the elders know what’s going on in each group?

A: By carefully selecting and training leaders, we’ll have group leaders that we can have confidence in. Additionally, every group will be studying the same material each week based on that Sunday morning’s sermon. Leaders will be using the same study guides and leading the discussion of the same biblical passages and topics. Third, elders who are not leading a group will visit different groups occasionally to provide guidance and oversight. Finally, group leaders are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the Life Groups coordinator or directly to the elders.

3. Q: What about the Lord’s Supper on Sunday night?

A: We will make sure the elements of the Lord’s Supper are available in each group who meets on Sunday nights.

4. Q: This could be controversial. What if some people aren’t happy about this idea?

A: We trust that our members will be receptive to what scriptures say about the need for developing stronger community and how the early church was involved in one another’s lives daily and often met in their homes. Our concern is not so much about keeping everybody happy as it is about doing the mission God has entrusted us with: evangelism, maturing disciples, caring for the hurting, sharing with those in need. All those things (and more) can be difficult to accomplish in a large auditorium but flow naturally out of small, connected groups.

5. Q: Won’t this lead to cliques in the church?

A: Cliques already exist in most churches, and yes, that includes ours. The goal of our groups is not to form cliques but close friendships in Christ. Our emphasis on the “empty seat” approach to evangelism (an empty chair at each meeting reminds us that the goal is to grow the group, not to maintain a comfortable size) will help avoid cliques. Also, the annual reshuffling of groups will ensure that cliquishness is avoided.

6. Q: What will we do with the kids?

A: Groups with kids will have a children's coordinator. The children's coordinator *does not* do all the teaching of the children. He or she simply ensures that one of the group members is assigned for each week and has sufficient resources to teach. The church will make a library of materials (books, videos, materials that can be photocopied, etc.) available to the groups.

7. Q: And what about the teens?

A: Groups will be set up for our teens. Groups will be strategically located near adult groups so that parents can drop their teen at their group and then attend their own adult group without having to travel a great distance. Teens who drive are free to choose any teen group they and their parents prefer.

8. Q: Will there be a service at the building on Sunday night?

A: No. The elders considered having something at the building for those who don't want to participate in Life Groups. After further discussion and prayer, the elders have decided not to have a regular worship service at the building. We want to encourage all of our members to be a part of a Life Group.

9. Q: What about Teens Worship Away?

A: Groups will meet in homes every Sunday night each month except one, which will be the third Sunday evening of the month. When TWA is at Laurel, the teens usually lead the service. Other months, we would have the opportunity for other activities including special song services, opportunities for Mike, Jeremy or some of our other men to preach, etc.).

10. Q: Will these groups meet in the same homes each week?

A: Maybe. This year we're encouraging more rotation of hosting duties among group members. We suggest that you rotate among two or three homes. For consistency (so everyone knows where you're meeting each week), we suggest that you meet in the same home for 6 to 8 weeks before moving to another home for 6 to 8 weeks. However, as long as the church office is kept informed (so we can publish meeting sites each week), meeting places can rotate as desired by the group.

11. Q: You mentioned fellowship. Does that mean we'll eat at every meeting?

A: That's up to each individual group. We anticipate that for some groups, eating together will become an integral part of their meeting. Others will probably choose not to share a meal. In groups that choose to eat together each week, a food coordinator would be delegated to coordinate the food each week (not provide it, just coordinate it).

12. Q: Are any other churches of Christ doing this and with what results?

A: Many congregations have implemented similar schedules. In particular, we've learned a lot from the Landmark church of Christ in Montgomery, Alabama. Following their implementation of small groups 10-12 years ago, they have grown from 400 to 1,400 in their Sunday morning services. Additionally, they have seen their Sunday evening attendance increase from 57% of their morning attendance before doing groups to 73% of their morning attendance since launching small groups. The spiritual benefit is more intangible but just as real.

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