

LIFE GROUPS

HOST GUIDE

“People do what people see. Modeling provides the basis of all true leadership, and leaders must set an example for their followers.”

– John Maxwell

WHAT AM I READING?

Understanding the Values

Understanding the values and purpose of Life Groups is essential and we want to offer you a healthy perspective of group life at our church. This handbook is a tool designed to clarify the purpose and mission of Life Groups, to qualify the measurements we use to determine group health and to communicate the expectations for Life Group hosts at Woodlands Church.

For Those Currently Hosting a Group

This material will hopefully be a great point of reference and refresher for you. You may already be familiar with many of the principles in the pages ahead. You may even be a veteran Life Group host with many years of experience, but there is still much to learn. We hope you will be challenged and encouraged as you understand the priorities and expectations of our Life Group hosts at Woodlands Church.

For potential new hosts, this handbook will give you an opportunity to “kick the tires” on the primary discipleship vehicle of Woodlands Church. Remember, God doesn’t call the equipped; He equips those whom He calls. If you say “yes” to that call, get ready for the ride of your life! You will be blessed as God uses you to bless others.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A LIFE GROUP?

To Create Healthy Environments Where Life Change Happens

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:46-47 ESV)

Life groups are a great place to meet friends, share life stories and enjoy one another’s company. But in order for life change to happen, it must go beyond a social or superficial setting. In fact, there are a number of groups that revolve around really good things like workout activities, children’s sports teams, neighborhood associations, etc. But in order for life change to take place, it is our belief that groups must be centered in Christ. Life change happens when we live out our faith in Christ with other believers as we help each other love, know and serve Jesus in a greater capacity.

Why Life Groups?

- They are infinitely expandable. Homes are everywhere and space is limited at the church building.
- They are unlimited geographically. Groups in the homes are not bound by a zip code and impact a wider area.
- They facilitate closer relationships. We have found that people are more relaxed in a home setting.
- Life Groups offer a variety of options to meet in (couples, singles, men’s and women’s groups).

WHAT IS THE MISSION OF WOODLANDS CHURCH?

Our mission is to help people experience Christ rather than man’s creation of religion, so they can grow strong in Christ and take the Christ experience to the world. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that He loves you unconditionally and has a plan and a purpose for your life.

In another way to say this, we want to first invite people to the party; second, connect them to the family; and third, launch them into ministry. We believe that the church is first an exciting place to receive the good news of Jesus. Then we know that we were never meant to go through life alone — Jesus had the disciples, we should have our people around us and it should feel like family. Lastly, we all have gifts and talents God has given to be used for His kingdom, so let’s use them to serve and encourage others in their relationship with Jesus. Ultimately, we are the Church and, as Christians, that is what we are called to go be — the message of Jesus to the world.

FIVE ESSENTIALS OF EVERY LIFE GROUP HOST

The first thing we look for is transformed lives. Perhaps the central purpose of Life Groups is that we would grow in Christ together. When God's people meet together for study and prayer things happen, God shows up, the Spirit comes in power, the lost get saved, the sick get healed, relationships get restored, lives are transformed and breakthroughs happen.

The second indicator is a healthy group environment produces closer relationships. Life change happens best in authentic community. Jesus modeled that; He spoke to thousands, but He picked twelve disciples to pour His life into. Of that twelve, He picked three — Peter, James and John. When you invest in people and when the people in your Life Group invest in each other, life change happens.

The third aspect that defines a healthy Life Group is through shared ownership. Your job as a host is *not* to do everything for your group; your job is to include everyone and make them feel like part of the family. And being a part of a family means that everyone needs to chip in and help do their part, so this means you are to delegate the responsibility of facilitating, hosting, coordinating and leading.

The fourth essential to a healthy group is to provide care. As life change happens, as relationships are being built and people experience community by participating and sharing life together, care will happen. That is why it is essential that you lead your group in providing care for one another. In the good times, we cheer for one another and in the hard times, we walk with one another. In the terrible times, we hold one another.

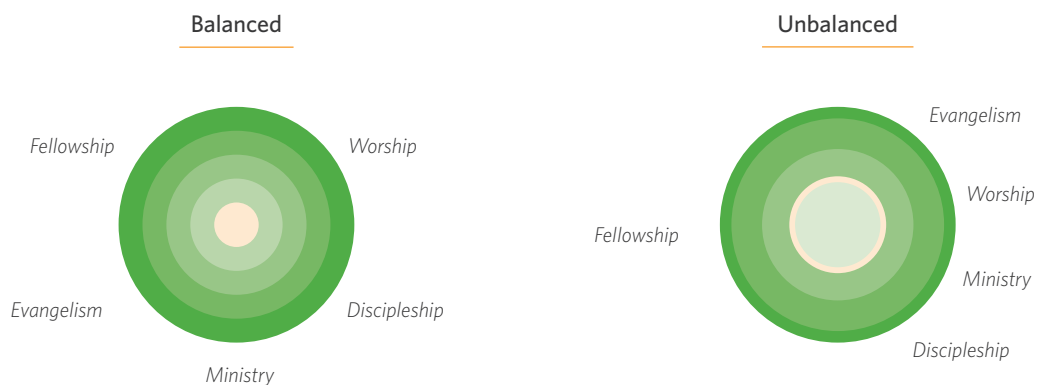
Lastly, we believe a healthy group environment will produce future hosts. Raising future leaders isn't an exact science. However, it is a natural byproduct of groups that have transformed lives, close relationships and share the responsibility of being a part of the group.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY GROUP LOOK LIKE?

Healthy and Unhealthy Groups

Life Groups are a key factor in shaping one's relationship with God and that is why it is crucial to understand the difference between a healthy group environment and an unhealthy group environment. Here are a few examples of healthy versus unhealthy groups.

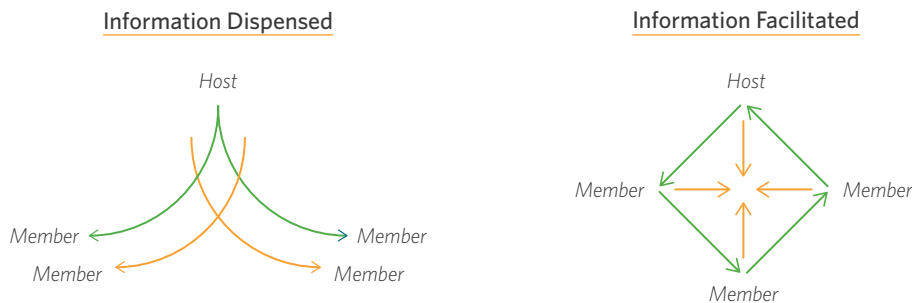
Balanced vs. Unbalanced Groups



Finding balance is key to a group's success. Groups will naturally gravitate towards something and it is your job as a host to make sure each core area is addressed. Leaders sometimes stress about getting to each of these purposes every time the group meets. Instead, evaluate on how well your group is doing these core aspects of Life Groups over the course of a season. Be creative, come up with new ways to do these in your group to keep it fresh as well. Do a BBQ one week or go out to a public place and invite people to church before Christmas Eve services; maybe even do a worship night or find a serving opportunity as a Life Group to do together. Don't let your group get stale.

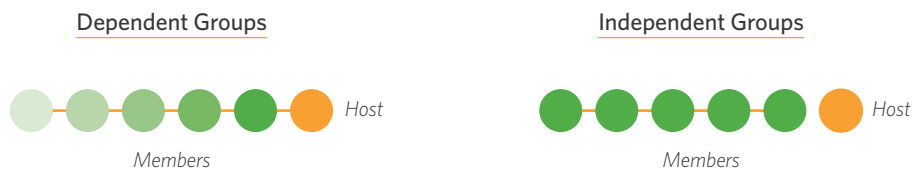
Information Dispensed vs. Information Facilitated

Do not do all the talking! One of your primary tasks is to get everyone involved in the conversation. A healthy group is a group where everyone has an equal amount of time to express their opinions and thoughts.



Independent and Dependent Groups

Let the group run without you. Resist the temptation to suspend the group when you go on vacation or are unable to attend. Instead, empower your group to meet and give others the opportunity to lead. This is the value of having a co-host so the group can always grow and continue consistently.



TIPS & TOOLS FOR LIFE GROUP HOSTS

Host Channel is our online training video platform where you can get great tips and ways to help you host your Life Group. These videos are short videos to help guide you in specific topics in Life Groups. They can be found on the Life Group page on the website or app.

Life Group coaching is available because relationships are vital to your success. You can be linked with a Life Groups Coach to help guide you and mentor you. Our coaches are incredibly church members who love the Lord and will be your first resource for any questions or concerns that may surface.

Communication with a Life Groups pastor or coordinator is required. They are assigned to each group and have the responsibility to make you feel connected to the church. If you ever need anything, they are available for you and will be reaching out on a monthly basis. This is an opportunity for us to get to know you and maybe answer any questions you might have.

One on One Mentoring

We believe Life Groups are the main vessel for spiritual growth because growth happens in community. Some growth in our lives comes from more intentional efforts on an even smaller scale. When we want to experience freedom and breakthrough in our lives from everyday struggles, sin, or addictions, we need accountability and support. One on One Mentoring comes from the relationships built in Life Groups. It does not always have to be a leader mentoring a group member, it could be a group member mentoring another group member, but it always is a one-way mentoring relationship. There is always a mentor and a mentee, not a back and forth mentoring format. If you are interested in this opportunity as a host, we greatly encourage you to use your coach as a mentor. They will have a set of specific questions to ask you on a weekly basis to hold you accountable, support you in what you have done well and continue to challenge you in areas you need to improve. Here are the list of questions and if you need a mentor, please reach out and let us know. If you would like to be a mentor and set up One on One Mentoring in your group, we would love to support creating those opportunities and relationships.

Here are the questions you would normally go through.

1. Personal check in. Aside from your circumstances, how are you doing — physically, emotionally and spiritually?
2. How are you doing with self-care? This includes diet, sleep, quiet time, exercise, and taking a day of rest.
3. How are you doing in the realm of focus and purity? Are you keeping your mind on the best things and avoiding the worst things?
4. If there is a bad habit or addiction, like procrastination or pornography, that you are attempting to address, have you made progress?
5. Is there anything you want me to ask you about this week?
6. Is there anything you are hoping I will not ask you about?
7. Is there anything you have lied about to me today or to someone else in the past week?

Ten Thoughts to Facilitating a Life Group

We have found that successful Life Groups have one thing in common: effective leaders. Andy Stanley puts it this way, “Leaders shape organizational culture whether they intend to or not.” What he is saying is that as a host you have tremendous influence on the culture of your group. So, here are ten practical suggestions to help you as a Life Group host.

1 Come to the meeting prepared

Have you ever been to a Life Group where someone was allowed to get on their “soapbox” and ramble on and on without any definite conclusion or direction? Or maybe you have been to a group where the same topic surfaces every week. I mean, is it really necessary to bring up the book of Revelation at every meeting? Even worse, you were a part of a group where the leader was clearly making up the agenda in the moment.

As a host, it is vital that you are prepared with a game-plan for the group. If you are using a study guide, it will probably take you anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour to mentally prepare and become familiar with the leader’s notes.

2 Pray for the members of your group before the study

If the Bible is to have an impact on their lives, the Holy Spirit must be at work in their hearts before, during and after the study. One prayer has the ability to change anything and everything.

3 Begin the study on time

People are busy. Be sensitive to the idea that people often times have razor thin margins in their schedules trying to manage their work, school, kid’s extracurricular activities, etc.

4 Explain that the studies are meant to be discussion, not lectures

Be on the lookout for people who may dominate the conversation. A healthy Life Group is a group where everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts or ideas. Encourage everyone to participate, but realize that some may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions.

5 Encourage more than one answer to each question

This requires that the host is a good facilitator. A good facilitator asks good questions. Questions should have more than one possible answer, so each person can share a unique perspective. Here are some key phrases that you might want to use often:

- What do the rest of you think?
- Does anyone else want to add to this thought?
- That’s a unique perspective, anyone else?

6 Affirm people’s answers

People are often reluctant to speak up unless you know you appreciate their insights and will not be shunned for their opinions. Simple words such as “That is a great insight,” “wonderful remark,” “excellent idea” or “I hadn’t thought of that before” are enough to show people you value their comments.

7 Don't be afraid of silence

Silence to a leader feels like nails on a chalkboard. But don't worry, it usually seems longer to you than to the other members of the group. Let's call it for what it is, awkward. In fact, it is terribly awkward but sometimes it is necessary because it will serve as a catalyst for conversation. Someone is bound to answer the question.

8 Resist the temptation to answer your own question

Yes, you are smart. Yes, your questions are insightful. But under no circumstance answer your own question, especially before the group has had time to answer it! If no one is biting on the question, try rephrasing it until the group understands what you are asking. A sure-fire way to ensure that a group will become passive and silent is if they think you will do most of the talking.

9 Never reject an answer, even if you think it is wrong

People are talking and engaged in your group and you are on cloud nine. And then it happens — someone puts forth an idea that is completely off the map. When you reject people's answers, they feel rejected as well (especially if you reject their answers in front of the group) and they may decide it is too risky to give their opinion again. A better response would be, "Which verse or sentence led you to that conclusion?"

If the stance is contrary to what Woodlands Church believes, try meeting with the person outside of the Life Group to discuss their thoughts. If the problem cannot be resolved, contact one of the pastors at the church to help mediate the discussion. But no matter what, handle yourself and clothe your words in love. Proverbs teaches us, "a gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger."

10 End the study on time

As much as it is possible. People are busy and it is important to respect their schedule.

How Do I Find New People to Join My Group?

You started a group, you picked out your curriculum and you bought the snacks. Now, all you need is some people. This is a very common question Life Group hosts face. You are bursting with enthusiasm to have a Life Group, but it may only be you and a few other people meeting at the moment.

First, be thankful for the people that are already in your group. People tend to open up and the conversation can be rich when there are only a few people meeting as a Life Group. This is a great time to get to know each other and strengthen your relationships with existing members. Don't be too quick to move past this time. But as you know, the goal is to bring new people into the fold. Which brings us back to our starting question, "How do I fill out my Life Group?" Who is out there that might want to come to my home for community? How do I find people to join our group?

We are going to offer you some tips and tools to help you fill your Life Group below, but we would strongly advise you not to solely rely on those tools. Instead, really think about inviting people you may already know in your circle of influence. It is not an accident where you live or the people you work with or the people you interact with throughout the week. The most natural place for you to find people to fill out your Life Group is to ask the people you already know. Take a moment and think of the people you could invite. Make a mental list of the neighbors, coworkers or friends that you could ask. Remember, filling out your group relies on the power of 'the ask.' If you don't ask, people will never know to attend.

Having a Difficult Time Finding Group Members? Here Are Three Options for You to Try

Option one is making sure your group is listed on the church's website. We only allow groups where the host has completed our Life Group requirements to be listed online. Those are to have a completed background check, be a WC Member, and have committed to our Life Group Host Covenant. We only make known the list of Life Groups that are open to receiving new members. So, please be sure your information is correct on our Life Groups web page.

Option two is to attend weekend services at WC and volunteer in the Life Group area in the lobby. This is a great space to meet new people and tell them specifically about your Life Group. We have pastors and coordinators every weekend in the Life Group lobby space and would love for you to come promote your Life Group with us.

Option three is trying serving. Every weekend, hundreds of volunteers gather each week to help out with the weekend services. Typically, no matter what area of ministry you volunteer in, you will never be alone. You will most likely serve alongside a group of people. This can be a great starting point to meet new people.

There are three ways to add new people to your Life Group. But remember, one of the best ways to fill out your group is to ask people you already know.

Teacher vs. Facilitator

The difference between a teacher and a facilitator in a Life Group setting is a part of a much larger conversation. It is really about your understanding of what authentic community looks like. Authentic Community is more than these transactional drive-by's where we ask the same "How's it going" questions and give the same "I'm fine" answers. Authentic community is more than enjoying a Bible study together and trading information about God and the Bible. Authentic community comes when we create an environment where people can get honest and transparent with one another. But in order to do that, we need to know the difference between the Life Group host's role as a teacher and one as a facilitator.

The role of the teacher is often formal and ongoing. It also typically requires a great deal of knowledge and further education about the subject matter. A teacher usually shares what they know while others listen. A facilitator, on the other hand, is someone who promotes active participation from everyone in the group. The facilitator's role is to support others in a group discussion. If the teacher's job is to share what they know then the facilitator's job is to ask questions to see what the group knows. This is an especially important distinction because some of us love to teach. We thrive in positions where we are teaching other people. And that is good thing. In fact, I think that is a God thing. God has given you the gift of teaching. However, it is important that we understand as Life Group hosts, we are primarily facilitators and not teachers. We want to be about community, we are striving for discussions, not dissertations, and we are looking for participation, not presentations.

The goal of the Life Group host is to get everyone involved in the conversation. Think about this: if you have eight people in your group and everyone shares for five minutes; that is forty minutes of your allotted Life Group time. Add in time for snacks, reviewing the material and enjoying one another's company and your time together begins to look fairly full. The truth is, we have found time and time again that an effective Life Group hinges on the host's ability to facilitate. Not even the best curriculum will keep people coming back to your Life Group if they do not feel a sense of ownership or outlet to express their thoughts and opinions.

Video Curriculum

Our church is constantly looking for new ways to serve and encourage you. We want you to not only hear the message from Pastor Kerry at the weekend service, but we want you to apply it to your life. We have Life Group curriculum that coincides with the message Pastor Kerry brings each weekend. The curriculum is available on the Woodlands Church App and on our website, WC.org/lifegroups. You can watch the curriculum video, look over message notes from the weekend and there are questions for you to start the discussion within your group.

Sample Group Meeting Format

- Welcome/Fellowship (30 min) — Food is always great here, time to hangout as everyone arrives
- Group Time (30 min) — Play the curriculum video and use the questions to start a discussion
- Prayer Time (30 min) — The discussion may take up more of this time but always close in prayer for each other

Honor the time of your group members. Try to have everything done around 1.5 hours. It is ok if you do not get to everything each night. The more you get to know one another the more you will be able to be flexible with time. Also, remember that many groups will share a meal together as well. Please be aware of this as you schedule your group's meeting times. Eating together is a great way to grow closer to each other and create a sense of family.

The Art of Asking Good Questions

The key to good discussions is good questions, so test for good questions

- Is the question clear?
- Is it a yes or no question? Use open ended questions to create great discussions
- Is it relevant to the material? Help the group stay on the subject

The following are common pitfalls to avoid when thinking of questions:

- Avoid questions that have a "right" or "wrong" answer to them. Instead, ask open-ended questions that might have many possible answers.
- Avoid asking multiple questions within the same question. Simply stick to one question at a time.

Use follow-up questions

- "Wow, I really liked what you said. Could you say more on that subject?"
- "Do you have an example of what you are talking about?"
- "What do you mean by the term _____?"
- "Where else have you heard something similar to that idea?"

Great discussions rarely happen on the fly. Be intentional with the questions you will ask and come prepared with more questions than not being prepared. You may only get to a few of the questions, but it is better to have more in your arsenal than trying to make up everything as you go.

What to do About Childcare

This is by far the number one conversation we hear at Woodlands Church. Here are six suggestions we would like to offer to help answer the question, "What do we do if we don't have anyone to watch our children?"

- Each family gets their own babysitter.
- Use the homes of two members who live close to each other. Have your meetings at one home and have child care at the other home provided by a babysitter or rotating group members.
- Dedicate one room in the house for childcare and bring a babysitter to the meeting place. Each family can contribute money for childcare costs.
- Rotate two members out of the Life Group on a weekly basis to provide childcare in another room of the house.
- Make your group a family group where children are allowed to play in the same room as the meeting. This typically works best when the children are small and not mobile.
- Trade childcare with another Life Group. If your group meets on Tuesday and you know another Life Group that meets on Thursday, offer to watch their children while they meet and ask them to do the same for your group.

LIFE GROUP MEMBER VALUES

Clear Purpose

To challenge and encourage one another to live a healthy and balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God.

Group Attendance

To give priority to the group meetings. To call, text or e-mail if I will be late or cannot attend.

Cultivate Relationships

To get to know one another outside the group meeting time and pray for one another regularly.

Shared Ownership

To share responsibilities and to encourage different people to host the group and lead the meeting.

Safe Environment

To create a safe place where people can be heard and loved. To not snap judgments or offer simple fixes to complex situations.

Respect Differences

To be gentle and gracious with people who are at different levels of spiritual maturity and who may have different opinions or personalities.

Confidentiality

To keep everything that is shared strictly confidential and within the group.

Intentional Invitation

To identify others who might benefit from this group and invite them to attend.