

Welcome to small groups.

You were made for community, and you will find yours here.

We are here for get-togethers and celebrations

For coffee dates and late-night Waffle House talks.

For family reunions and birthday parties.

For worship together and laughing in the lobby on Sunday.

For sharing special moments.

But its much more than all that. We are each others companions along
The Way of Jesus.

We learn together, encourage each other to move closer to Jesus and
cheer each other on as we move with Him. We pray and believe and
help each other reach our circles.

We cultivate the gifts God has given each of us. Learning to find our
prophetic voice and use it to encourage the whole.

We care for one another. In good times and hard times, we help those
in need in whatever way we can. We pray for one another. We care for
those who are sick and we mourn with those who mourn.

In Hebrews chapter 10, there's a beautiful framework for what life in
true Christian community is like.

...And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

We have been brought up in a culture where individuality, personal freedom, privacy and self-reliance are the highest ideal.

Understandably, each of us brings some of this good ole Americana into our walk with Jesus and to our church relationships. If you're like me, I balk at any "stirring".

Someone in the church office has been trying to get to the bottom of a problem of mine, but my reaction is "You don't know me. How dare you say I have a problem since I have 6 cars for two drivers...only two of them actually work properly...don't judge me" True story, I really do have a problem... but you don't understand. My dad was a mechanic. I grew up building junk cars into cool things. Yeah, yeah...

It's a silly example, but aren't all of us like that? We don't want anyone in our business. We certainly don't want churchy people telling us how to live our lives. I've been doing it this way forever. When God shows me, I'll change. For us, Christianity is all about my personal devotions. My quiet time. It's just me and Jesus and my old pickup

truck...and vintage golf, and electric Nissan leaf, and two Mazda's, and a Land Rover... ok maybe I do have a problem.

As a result of our over valuing individualism we end up as an aggregation instead of a congregation . Just a collection of individuals rather than a living family of God.

It's like this example that I'm going to steal from my daughter macey. She prepared a sermon for praise youth that talks about this very thing. And her example is this:

For most of our churches, we're like this bag of marbles. Each of us are individuals just like the marbles in this bag. We're gathered together because we belong to our group. Maybe we really like the sermons, the style, the music, the building, the programs, the denomination. or the size or whatever it is. But those things are just the bag that holds these independent marbles. It's just an aggregate. When something changes, when I'm not into that thing any more. When the style changes or whatever it may be. When the bag is broken or gone, the marbles scatter. If it has a hole, a bunch of marbles might slip out. You see it often, folks head for a different aggregation when they get tired of the one they're in.

But then consider this bag of grapes. Each of these grapes is an individual, but they're clustered together with a bunch of other

individual grapes. And each are connected to another cluster through the vine. They all have one source but each rely on each other and are connected together. The individuals are a part of one living organism. The health of each grape is affected by the health of the whole. If we take away the bag, not much happens. The grapes aren't merely an aggregation of individuals.

You can see where we're going with this. Grapes aren't just an aggregation of individuals, they are a living whole. That's how it is with a congregation. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. We are each individually relying on a single source of life, but we are each connected to one another. The health of the whole is affected by every single individual.

That is the picture of what we want for small groups. Each is like a little bunch of grapes who belong to and rely on the whole cluster.

The instruction from Hebrews is that we should first. **Consider one another.** In the original language it would read something like "consider one another in order to stir up..." The first thing on our minds should be someone other than me. I should be thinking about, praying for, paying attention to the others in my group.

Then we should **Provoke one another** unto **love** and **good works.**

It is our responsibility to continue to challenge one another to grow. That can be really hard for some of us. Some of us hate uncomfortable conversations. But some of us love it. You know the ones who are almost too good at calling you out. Whew. But it's all of our jobs to provoke one another. We can't leave it just for those who are good at speaking their minds.

The provoking is balanced with the next responsibility. **Encouraging** one another. Just as we need to prod each other along, we must lock arms and hold each other up with words of encouragement, prayer, and walking alongside one another.

Our groups are to be:

Companions along the way of Jesus.

As we move to and with Jesus to learn the unforced rhythms of grace. We're here to spur and cheer each other along. We want to be used by the Spirit to help each other be formed into who God has for each of us to be.

As we live out of faith to our circles, our groups are here to help us identify, invest in, pray for, and invite those who are in the "front row" of our lives to Jesus.

Groups are here to

Care for one another

We know the needs of those in our group first. We can be spiritual first responders to those needs through living radical generosity. We're here for confession, prayer, restoration, encouragement, visiting the sick, and providing for needs.

And we're here to

Cultivate the Gifts of the Spirit

We believe the Spirit was poured out for all flesh and that the gifts of the Spirit are for the common good of all the church.

We want our groups to be led by the Spirit and each person to be actively participating in group gatherings by using their gifts.

We believe the Spirit gives each believer a prophetic voice. Each of us are to speak forth truth, in love. Groups are the place for us to find and exercise our voice.

The Christian faith was designed to be lived in community. Scripture can't be fully considered without the council and perspective of the community. Prayer is designed to be most effective when in agreement with others. Joy and celebration are to be shared. Weeping and sorrow can be weathered together.

Small groups are missional communities of people moving to and with Jesus, recovering real life, being transformed from the inside out by His Spirit, and reaching their circles and neighborhoods. Through the power of the Spirit, these groups are little gardens of eden; little oases in our neighborhoods where heaven meets earth.

Small groups aren't just about filling a house with people to watch a video and have a discussion, having a tight knit group and being there for each other's life events. They're about those things and much more. The goal is that we and everyone in our circles and our communities move to and with Jesus to be changed from the inside out and to change our world for good.

Thank you for continuing this Journey with us. My prayer for you is that small groups will be life giving and filled with joy, and that you will continue to learn the unforced rhythms of Grace, but always together.