

If you have a Bible, we'll be in **Ephesians 4** tonight

Jon and I have been mapping out our LifeGroup leader meeting content for the fall and the spring as well - I think its going to be really helpful and to give you a lay of the land...there are two big goals we're shooting for in this next calendar year:

1.) LifeGroup Leader health and longevity

- Our goal is that you would so enjoy the ministry of LifeGroup leading, that you would be so equipped and trained and supported that leading for 20 plus years wouldn't be out of the question. LifeGroup leader burnout is the enemy for us as your pastors.
- And just so you know... this is not some pie in the sky, pipe dream naive ideal. **We are well aware of the weight** associated with leading a group. The care issues that can come up. The number of different logistical items required to be juggled. For your group to function.
- And still we believe it's possible for you to lead a group faithfully for 20 plus years enduring the hardships along the way, but overall with a smile on your face and experiencing a lot of joy in the process.
- **In case you think that's crazy talk...** there's a trade secret, best practice, a secret sauce if you will with data to back it up that can really make this possible... But I'm not going to tell you what it is just yet.

Because first I have two tell you about a second huge goal for this upcoming year:

2.) Get people moving and make room for hospitality.

- Two weeks ago - **loved, known and challenged towards Christlikeness.**
 - This is the culture we're trying to set in LGs - more than friend groups, more than therapy groups - we're going for maturity and movement and change.
- Like Jon taught on Sunday from **Hebrews 12:2 - the call to practice hospitality to strangers** is a beautiful and non-optional command for followers of Jesus. It's one of the ways we most beautifully reflect the way that Jesus pursued us when we were strangers to Him.
- And unfortunately, when it comes to our LifeGroups, we find ourselves in a spot where we are not able to offer very much hospitality at the moment.
 - **In the Fall of last year, we did a Sunday survey where we 150 people reported that they were not currently in a LifeGroup. Heading into the fall we currently have 32 open spots in LifeGroups.**
- Now I'm not great at math... but one of those numbers is significantly bigger than the other. AND that doesn't include ANY and ALL of the new people we expect to show up because that's the trend every fall.
 - **People like one of the baristas at Azalea Coffee who this past Sunday recognized a mom and her foster baby from the Gathering and told her - "Hey! I saw you and your baby at Midtown on Sunday. I'm not a Christian but I'm in college and figured I need to decide on this whole religion thing. Midtown seems different. I really liked it."**

And hear me, there are some factors that have absolutely made this situation harder and worse. Covid-19 was an unprecedented social situation that nearly shut down our leadership pipeline for over a year.

But regardless of the challenges, **we have to get people moving.** For the sake of the gospel. For the sake of hospitality. For the sake of our own people's spiritual growth.

Now here's the good news. The secret sauce for long term LifeGroup Leader health and longevity and joy... and the key to getting people moving and creating space for new folks to find church family and community **are actually the same thing.**

The key for the healthiest groups we have, with the most joy-filled group leaders who can weather the hardest things for the long haul is this: **a thriving, fully functional core group** of members who help carry the weight. Like we've said about a 1000 times over the years, **many hands make for light work**.

And helping people grow into functional core group roles is also the best way to prepare them for leadership and planting new groups and creating more space for new folks and nonbelievers to come find church family.

And this really shouldn't come as much of a surprise to us. I want to look at a passage with you that we have looked at many times in our church's history:

Ephesians 4:11-16

...¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The maturity of our entire church depends in part on, the pastors and the staff not withholding ministry for ourselves but training and equipping you for it. Mature in doctrine, able to recognize winds of crafty deceitful schemes. Speaking the truth in love so we all grow in the way we need to. Connecting to Jesus our head and the whole body then working properly and strongly together moving forward in love.

This is the design. This is the goal. This is how Jesus engineered His church to work.

And overall I think we've done a great job at this in so many ways... You guys are all proof of that. Coaches and LifeGroup leaders who take the weight of shepherding little groups of people in our church. That's beautiful! We all together have 100 fold more ability to engage and disciple individuals than any one of our pastors do individually.

He's inviting you into His work with Him. He's inviting you to join the work of His kingdom advancing.

Beautiful. It's one of my favorite things about our church. So many churches you hear about the 80/20 rule... It's the idea that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. Not here. Listen we've still got some overachievers who really struggle to say no to every opportunity they're presented with. But I'd say it's closer to 80% of our members who are engaged, serving and carrying significant amounts of weight in one way or another.

But here's the problem. That pattern of handing ministry off. Empowering and equipping the saints to do the work of ministry... I think what we're seeing is that in many ways **it's stopped at the level of LifeGroup leader**. Here's why I say that:

So we end up with a lot of LifeGroup leaders who look at their group and they go: whooo, that's a lot of work to do.

- Lot of people to care for.
- Lot of people to lead.
- Gotta figure out where we're gonna meet.

- And if we're doing food how are we doing food?
- And what night of the week works best for everyone?
- And they told me we're supposed to do a rhythm so I gotta plan that. And oh no, what are we gonna do about childcare?
- Meanwhile you're telling me to raise up an LIT and plant a new LifeGroup - are you kidding me?!

And if this is how you approach leading your group, number 1, I'm so sorry for you. Never at any point in time have we wanted that to be your life. You are setup for burnout in roughly 30 minutes. If you're crazy high capacity, extremely passionate and under the age of 25... I'll give you 2 weeks.

This is what we might call **a level 1 group**. A group where the leader thinks everything is on them and they're slowly but surely dying. And give it time, you will end up burnt out. You will likely end up bitter and frustrated with us. It wouldn't surprise me if you get to a point where you go "the whole system and idea of lifegroups is insane."

And then there's another problem that happens here that you may not expect: You go to someone in the group and say "Hi I think you'd make a great Leader in Training. Do you want to do that?" and they look at you frazzled and holding on by a thread and they say "No thank you very much. I'd like to keep my sanity."

Level 1 groups can look very healthy for a time, but over time they have the least longevity for LifeGroup leader health and sustainability which remember is our Biggest goal #1! AND they are the least good at moving people and planting and multiplying which is goal #2.

Ok that's level 1... what's a Level 2 group look like:

Level 2 group - A level 2 group has some amount of a coregroup or a Leader-in-Training who's helping take some of the weight off the Lifegroup leaders' shoulders. Hooray! That's already a huge improvement from Level 1.

- The primary problem in a level 2 group though is that the Leader is still the one making everything happen. If the LIT is going to run group discussion this week, it's because the leader asked them to.
- If a core group member is going to organize a pool party, it's because the leader asked them to.
- Or if a core group person missed LifeGroup that week, then the leader is scrambling to figure out who's going to pick up the slack

The group is starting to have more hands carry the weight of the group, but it's not yet a thriving fully functioning core group.

So if this is where, you are, that's not bad. You're probability of longevity is much higher than level 1. Your ability to move people is at least happening somewhat.

But if you as the leader are still the one who's always distributing the ball and making everything happen, then you're still carrying a lot of weight even though it's shared.

Level 2 groups often time have that moment when something goes wrong and everyone looks at the leader and the leader goes “ahhhh crap. I gotta fix this.”

Which is **Level 3 groups**:

A level three group is a group with a fully functioning core group. Not just willing members who will help when they are asked to help.

But core group members who own areas of weight in the group and make it happen with or without the LG leader even having to ask.

Let me describe to you a friend of mine’s lifegroup:

- Each week, a rotation of the leaders, different core group members and the LITs are responsible for leading portions of group discussion time. There is a semester long schedule where everyone can look ahead of time to see what they are responsible for. If they can’t do a week, they find someone else to cover their responsibility.
- Each week, specific core group members and LIT’s are responsible to follow up on care issues that came up during engage the heart.
- A core group member sends out a weekly email with any and all needed communication including the LifeGroup guide, upcoming events and a google calendar for their LG that that group member keeps updated.
- The plan for childcare is covered by... you guessed it the core group.
- Core Group members host weekly LG time.
- Core group members and LIT’s schedule rhythms each week. They host brunch after gatherings. The entire group brings food so it’s not too much work for anyone.

Ok remember our two main goals? **1: LifeGroup leader health and longevity**:

- My friend told me that in this group you could show up for a month and never even know who the leader was if they didn’t go out of their way to introduce themselves to you. Because the whole group is doing the work of ministry like Ephesians 4 says.
- This group has gone through some brutally painful care issues. Deep seasons of depression. Loss. Grief. And the Leaders aren’t dying because the group cares for the care issues of the group together. And even when the weight is HEAVY, ***many hands make for light work.***

Ok, well what about goal #2: **Get people moving and make room for hospitality.**

- And over the course of the past few years, this group has planted out 2 groups that are doing well. One is about to plant another new group...
- And even though they planted in the last 6 months, they’re already getting so full they’re starting to plan and strategize for what their next plant will be.
- They’d be the first to tell you, planting is hard. Gospel goodbyes are painful. But they’re worth it. And they aren’t planting because groups team is forcing them to. They’re planting because they love sharing the hospitality of Jesus with others and they love seeing people in the group receive the grace of growing in their gifts.
- Oh guess what happens they ask people if they want to be LIT’s? It’s not always a yes... but it’s a way higher hit rate, because the LIT knows... all I have to do is be a super core group member. The main shift is I help organize the other core group members who are doing a great job at what they’re doing.

Now stop and hear me. This group is very ideal in many ways. And it didn't happen overnight. Your group is not going to get here overnight. But it is possible to take steady steps to move in this direction.

- Conversation I had recently with LG leaders about how to stop feeling so much weight.

Our goal for each and everyone of your groups is that you would be moving toward being a Level 3 group with a fully functional, healthy, vibrant core group and LIT's who are helping carry the weight - logistical, spiritual, emotional, relational with or without you having to ask them to do it every step of the way.

Here's how we're going to approach step 1:

We broke down Core Group into four main areas of oversight -

- Discussion Time
 - Someone overseeing all of the elements of group time
 - You may have some people in place for certain portions, like you may have a Sermon Discussion leader and an Engage the Heart leader AND you may want to put one person in place overseeing it - that way, you don't have to. You free yourself up, your empowering people into leadership, and by doing so you make room for more people to join your group!
 - You may also put someone in place to do the whole discussion time - all four elements. The good news is, we've made discussion time dummy-proof. All you gotta do is read the LifeGroup Guide.
 - You may prefer to be that person if you really want to - that's great - AND our job as people doing the work of ministry is to equip others to do it too.
 - I would also suggest if you're going to be the person overseeing this area - that you probably cannot do the other areas as effectively because no one is omniscient. If you are, please tell me.
- Prayer and Care Follow Up
 - Someone in place who's keeping track of who needs prayer for what each week. And if any bigger care issues come up, they're following up with the LifeGroup leader to work through a plan how best to care for them.
 - This doesn't mean they're following up with every person who needs care, but they're zooming out and making sure someone is reaching out
 - The bigger point is, it's not all on you the LG leader to ensure everyone is getting cared for. You're empowering someone else, freeing yourself up, and in so doing, you can then add more people into your group.
- Welcome Wagon
 - Hospitality people. We want to see new people invited into LifeGroups - AND - LifeGroup is a new experience for most people. It's more than a Bible study and it's more than a friend hangout. But most people don't know that just from signing up online. So this is someone who has the availability and social maturity to reach out, narrate expectations to the new person, and help them transition into LifeGroup well
- Hospitality - childcare, hosting
 - Hospitality logistics.
 - Childcare, hosting, rhythms

Now again, level 1 LifeGroups are having to think through all of this. And while I think all of you are awesome, its just too much to handle on your own. Also, even the highest capacity leaders are going to be super great at some areas and not so great at other areas. This leads to burnout.

Also, level 2 LifeGroups, you may have people set in place that are kinda sorta filling in these spots. That's wonderful, AND with this shift, we want to emphasize ownership over tasks.

There's a difference between the two. With my kids, if I tell them, "Hey will you remember to take out the trash?" Versus "That's your job. You got this. I'm not going to remind you. If you need help, I'm here for you, but I think you're the right person for the job"

[Summary - vision]

So here's what this semester will look like...

....next LG Leader Meeting we will have job descriptions laid out for each of these. Chris, our exec pastor, is gonna teach us how to best recruit people into these roles

....the next one after that, we're gonna do something different...Tuesday, November 14 we're asking, rather than Group leaders meeting with their coaches, we're going to meet back here on campus and the people you want challenged into these four areas will be invited too - and we'll have a training sessions for your Core group members, your LIT's and for you - in the hopes that we raise the bar for them.