

A Vision for Life Groups at Pepperell Christian Fellowship

September 2008

A Biblical Rationale

The New Testament repeatedly affirms that ministry within the body of Christ occurs not just from pastor or elders to congregation, but between members of the congregation. In 1 Thessalonians 5.14, Paul exhorts the whole congregation, not just the leaders: ‘And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.’

This kind of specific, individualized ministry cannot possibly occur fully on a Sunday morning. It assumes a below-the-surface knowledge of the individual, the particular struggles of that individual, and a thoughtful, ongoing response that is tailored to the individual’s needs. This kind of knowledge and response cannot occur if we know each other only well enough to offer a greeting on Sunday morning.

This same depth of knowledge and mutual ministry is implied elsewhere in the New Testament.

Hebrews 3.12-13 says: ‘Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.’

Hebrews 10.23-25 says: ‘Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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.’

These verses highlight the real danger posed to every Christian by the deceitfulness of sin. The God-ordained provision in the face of the real and present danger of sin is the mutual care of believers for one another. According to Hebrews 10.23-25, this includes exhortation and encouragement.

If we are to take seriously the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5.14 and the command of Hebrews 3.12-13 to be exhorting one another ‘every day,’ it is necessary that every member of our church be in close relationship with some other members.

We know of no better way to facilitate this Biblical vision of congregation-wide ministry than through the promotion, equipping, and ongoing support of Life Groups at PCF. Some PCF members are already in small groups that meet on a regular basis as part of other ministries, and we are thankful for that. Our purpose is not to ask that you also join a Life Group, but rather to provide Life Groups for those who are not currently involved in a small group that meets on a regular basis.

A Vision for Life Groups

Our vision for Life Groups at PCF is of a multiplying network of geographically-based, gospel-centered, outward-looking home groups, supported by and accountable to the elders and the Life Group ministry of PCF, and seeking to sustain the life of Christ in their members and bring new life to the communities around them.

Let's unpack that vision phrase by phrase.

Our vision is that the Life Groups at PCF will be a **multiplying network** of groups. The term 'multiplying' expresses our desire that these groups will not be static entities that meet without change year after year. We want Life Groups to *grow* through the inclusion of new members. When a group grows beyond the number of members who can comfortably fit in a living room, the group will 'multiply,' with the assistant leader of the group leading some members of the group to form a new Life Group. The term 'network' expresses our desire that these groups not be 'Lone-Ranger' groups, unattached and doing their own thing, without the resourcing and accountability of the elders and Life Group ministry of PCF. More on that latter point below.

Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **geographically based**. This was the pattern of the earliest churches – Christians gathered together with other believers who lived in their immediate vicinity (Romans 16.1, 3-5; 1 Corinthians 1.1). There are numerous advantages to being geographically based:

- it is easier to meet together or to help other members of your group in a crisis, because you're close – no need to drive 45 minutes. This also means it will be easier to develop friendships outside of your weekly meetings.
- it is more conducive to developing an evangelistic heart for your local community and doing outreach as a Life Group in your neighborhood
- geographically based home groups are less likely to cause hurt feelings, because groups are not formed by friendship circles that already exist, with some people feeling excluded
- geographically based groups tend to result in a wider diversity of members. Rather than forming groups with people exactly like you, it is more likely that your Life Group will consist of a mix of ages, vocational backgrounds, marital status, and personalities. This is highly desirable, as we seek to love and learn from the whole body of Christ, not just people exactly like us

Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **gospel-centered**. Life Groups are not simply times to 'hang out' and shoot the breeze. We certainly want to encourage friendships and fun times together, but our vision for Life Groups goes well beyond that. We are praying for and seeking the kind of gospel-centered, one-another ministry described in 1 Thessalonians 5.14 and Hebrews 3.12-13; 10.23-25. Our vision is that the Word of God will be central in every Life Group, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be proclaimed and honored as members of each group encourage each other to greater godliness and obedience to the Lord Jesus.

Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **outward-looking**. This is certainly not to deny the importance of ministry to one another – that is, after all, the mandate of 1 Thessalonians 5.14 and

Hebrews 3.12-13; 10.23-25. However, it is not uncommon for small groups to grow so close to each other over years of meeting together that they can become inward-looking and cliquish. Our vision is that the increased obedience and joy that flows from the one-another encouragement of these Life Groups would overflow in love for non-believing friends, family, and communities. Our desire is that, with the help and resourcing of the Life Group ministry at PCF, each Life Group would think of creative ways to engage their local communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This might include running an Alpha or Christianity Explored evangelistic course, participating in a service project in the community once a month, or inviting unbelievers to visit your group for Bible studies.

Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **home groups**. There is something very good about meeting in someone's home. The atmosphere is more relaxed and enjoyable, and we get to know one another better in our homes. Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF would regularly eat together, perhaps sharing a meal once a month.

Our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **supported by and accountable to the elders and the Life Group ministry of PCF**. Our vision is to have each Life Group led by a leader who has met with the elders and has been trained by the Life Group ministry at PCF, and that each leader of a Life Group has an assistant leader who is being prepared and mentored by the Life Group leader to eventually lead a new Life Group. In order to promote ongoing accountability and adequately equip leaders of the Life Groups, our vision is that each Life Group will meet for three Wednesdays (or some other night that works for the members of the group) of the month. The fourth Wednesday will be a time for the leader and assistant leader of each Life Group to gather together and pray with all the other Life Group leaders, and be trained and equipped by the elders and the Life Group ministry of PCF.

Finally, our vision is that Life Groups at PCF will be **seeking to sustain the life of Christ in their members and bring new life to the communities around them**. This is why we're calling these groups 'Life Groups': because we are committed to sharing our lives together, and because we are seeking to live out the new life Christ has given us, and spread the news of this new life to as many as we can.

The goal of Life Groups at PCF

Our four-fold goal for PCF Life Groups is that they would be used by God to promote greater love between the members of PCF (John 13.35), to encourage deeper investigation of the Bible and its claims upon us (Acts 17.11), to foster the flourishing of Christian obedience in every area of life, and to launch each of us into greater engagement with our communities and non-Christian friends.

This can be summed up with the acronym **LIFE**:

Loving relationships
Intercessory prayer
Foundational teaching
External focus