

## **CHRIST FELLOWSHIP'S VIEW SMALL GROUPS OR SUNDAY SCHOOL**

As a church gets larger in its worship settings, it must also get smaller by forming smaller groups. There are two major approaches to organizing these smaller gatherings: Sunday school and small groups.

Sunday school was the preferred approach in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it has been in decline over the last 50 years as more and more churches have moved away from this model. Some churches have Sunday school because that's how things have been done in the past, and a few use it to great success. However, most new churches are using small groups rather than Sunday school.

Neither approach is commanded in the Bible. Therefore, the two models should be evaluated on how well they achieve Christ's mission for today at this particular church. Which strategy best helps people find and follow Christ? Which strategy helps people to be able to engage God individually, connect in a group, worship in a gathering and impact others?

A few churches attempt both Sunday school and small groups, but usually that creates strategic confusion and stretches resources to support two organizations for adults. It is best to choose one approach or the other.

### **Comparison and Contrast of the Two Approaches**

	<b>Sunday School</b>	<b>Small Groups</b>
<b>Time</b>	During or next to services	Off service-times
<b>Location</b>	In rooms at church	In homes
<b>Duration</b>	45-65 minutes	2-3 hours
<b>Food</b>	Donuts and coffee	Snacks and meals
<b>Atmosphere, dress</b>	Suitable for church	Relaxed, informal
<b>Cost of space</b>	High, more church building space	None, use homes
<b>Size</b>	5-200	5-20
<b>Outreach opportunity</b>	Those who will come to church	Those who will visit a home
<b>Children</b>	In childcare at church	Various forms of childcare
<b>Frequency</b>	Weekly	Weekly to twice a month

At Christ Fellowship, we chose the small group approach when we designed our facilities because we believe it is the best approach at this time to carry out Christ's mission in this community. As a result, we have developed our ministries in keeping with this approach and call our main groups Life Groups.

As a result of our choice of strategies, we do not have extra rooms to house adult Sunday school classes.

## **WHY LIFE GROUPS?**

Two fundamental convictions guided our decision:

1. Every Christian needs a spiritual family. We all need a place where we can really get to know each other. We need a group where we receive care, guidance, and prayer – where we can ask questions and share struggles. We also need a group where we can do life together as well as to learn to engage God individually, worship in a gathering and impact others for Christ.
2. Every Christian needs a laboratory for life. There are over 50 one-another commands in the Bible. To name just a few, we are challenged to love one another (John 13:34-35), pray for one another (James 5:16), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18), and stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). The small group provides a spiritual family where the one-another commands can be lived out.

We believe small groups are the best approach to help people find and follow Christ. Spiritual growth is accelerated in a relational community where we have the time and place to be authentic and to really know each other. Life Groups can more easily serve the community and reach out to new people.

## **STRENGTHS OF THE LIFE GROUP MODEL**

1. Transforms people to Christlikeness by providing a spiritual family and a laboratory for life.
2. Provides a relational atmosphere for building strong friendships and community.
3. Gives significant time for interaction and learning in the meetings.
4. Not bound by church building size - ministry can grow exponentially without additional building fund expenditures.
5. Promotes hospitality by having members open their homes (Romans 12:13b)

6. Is conducive to evangelism by inviting people who initially would not be open to attend a church service, and by praying for lost friends and hosting local outreach events.
7. Maximizes the number of adults who can serve our children in Promiseland, Front Line ministries and Worship Arts during the services by not offering adult Sunday school as a competing opportunity at the same time.
8. Avoids logistical challenges. If one has an adult Sunday school program with multiple Sunday morning services, then a fully involved adult will attend one worship service, serve in a second service time slot and in a third service time slot attend adult Sunday school. This three-slot time need creates challenges for families with children.

Children have a difficult time staying in Promiseland for three consecutive repeated services. It then poses the daunting challenge of creating two to three different worship experiences for those children whose parents are involved in two to three consecutive services.

9. Provides options for those who find it difficult to attend a meeting on Sunday morning in addition to church services.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Q: We want to go to a small group, but we can't find babysitters. We're new to the area. And even if we do find one, we can't afford to pay them.

A: We recognize this as a difficult problem with our Life Group approach. In learning from other churches and trying various solutions, we have discovered there is not a universal single answer. Instead, we suggest various options for childcare for Life Groups:

1. Each family pays for their own childcare arrangements
2. Use subsidized childcare at the church on the nights it is offered\*
3. Have the children attend the Life Group meeting.
4. Have parents in the Life Group rotate watching the children.
5. Have the children in a separate room or across the street with teenage siblings, or pool funds to hire babysitters.

6. Provide scholarships for group members who need assistance.

\*Currently childcare is offered at the church multiple nights. The cost is minimal per child and per family.

Many Life Groups find that certain meetings, especially picnics, are very conducive to including the children. We see Life Groups as groups of families, not just adults.

Q: Can our Life Group meet on Sunday mornings?

A: If we conduct Life Group meetings at church on Sunday mornings, it has a negative impact on our Sunday morning ministries as mentioned above under Strengths of the Life Group Model, number 8.

## **SUMMARY**

At Christ Fellowship, we have prayerfully chosen the small group approach. As a result, we have developed our ministries in keeping with this approach and call our main groups Life Groups. Due to our choice of strategies, we do not have extra rooms to house adult Sunday school classes.