

What Are Community Groups?

Mini-communities that nurture our relationships with God, one another, and our city

Intro & Instructions: *The following is a summary of Grace DC's Community Group (CG) ministry — its purpose, place, people, plan, and prayers. It may help you understand why your CG exists and how you can participate in one meaningfully. Read through this document individually and/or together as a group. Give your group members a chance to process, respond, and ask questions. Leaders may facilitate discussion using the questions provided at the end or simply address whatever interests your group members.*

I. WHY DO WE HAVE COMMUNITY GROUPS? [Purpose]

Our Community Groups are intentional gatherings of 10-15 people which are designed to foster *community*. Each group aims to nurture three sets of relationships which intersect in Christian community: our relationship with **God**, our relationship with **one another** in the church, and our relationship with **our city** and those who live in it.

Some of you may have participated in small group Bible studies before. A CG is *more* than a Bible Study. Group members engage in a broad and holistic range of activities — a cross-section of all that Christians ought to be doing when they gather together. This includes praying, serving, witnessing, and building mutually supportive relationships, *in addition* to studying the Bible (Acts 2:42-47). In this regard, we also might say that a CG is more than a mere “group.” Rather, it’s a *mini-community* of people that are learning to share “real life” together. Thus, each of these communities begins with and centers upon a 1.5 to 2 hour-long weekly meeting held in homes and apartments throughout the District. However, group members may also desire to spend time together at other times and places during the week.

There are many activities and programs at Grace DC; but CGs serve as the “backbone” of our church. Given the size of our church and the relational challenges that come with it (e.g., deepening relationships at Sunday worship), a CG will typically serve as a person’s “primary community” within Grace DC. That is, it will be the first and main place people can go to be connected to the church, work the gospel into daily life, be known by others, invite friends who are looking into Christianity, use their gifts, and serve the needs of others.

II. WHERE DO THESE GROUPS MEET? [Place]

Neighborhood Communities. CGs are an important avenue through which we will learn to serve the District (Grace DC’s “mission field”) together. Each group should gather at least once a month to serve its local neighborhood in creative ways (e.g., cleaning up a neighborhood park, throwing a block party, attending an ANC meeting, etc.). Why? The gospel calls us to love the people and the place immediately around us wherever we are (Jer. 29:4-7; Luke 10:25-37; John 1:14; 20:21). Individuals are therefore urged to attend a group in their home neighborhood. Those who are not residents of DC may “adopt” a neighborhood by joining a group that meets in an area where they long to invest their time and energy. Indeed, experience has shown us when group members live in close proximity to each other, they not only have greater opportunity to see and spend time with each other more spontaneously (growing “inwardly”), but also have a more informed and organic understanding of the needs of their neighbors (extending “outwardly”).

III. WHO ARE COMMUNITY GROUPS FOR? [People]

Shepherding Communities. The CG ministry is the principal structure through which Grace DC members are connected, formed, and shepherded. The Bible envisions a church where members receive the bulk of their care from *one another* through face-to-face, “high density” relationships (Rom. 12:9-21; Eph. 4:1-16). In other words, every single one of you is equipped with an abundance of love, gifts, faith, and wisdom that can and must be used to help others grow! And yet, God has also established elders in the church to shepherd and equip you for this task (1 Pet. 5:1-3; Eph. 4:11-12). So each group is overseen by an elder of the church who offers support to the CG leader and shepherds members in more acute counseling situations. Therefore, if you are a member of the church but are not connected to a CG, it will be extremely challenging to receive the care you need.

A Community for Others. As with all community activities at Grace DC, our CGs are open to all people of various dispositions towards Jesus, including the “unconvinced” and skeptical. More than ever, it’s important for those looking into Christianity not only to understand Christian beliefs but also to see what it looks like for real people to live out these beliefs in real relationships. Thus, CGs can provide an environment where it’s safe to observe quietly and ask questions. Again, CGs serve as the basic units of the “inwardly growing and outwardly facing” church we long to be. Each mini-community gathers not only for spiritual nurture, accountability, and Christian discipleship (“inwardly growing”), but also for evangelism, outreach, and serving our local neighbors and neighborhoods (“outwardly facing”). Yes, these communities exist for those not in the room (yet)! So group members are urged to be “bringers,” persistently looking for opportunities to invite friends, colleagues, and Grace DC visitors to CG activities. When CGs grow to maximum capacity because of this bringer dynamic, we will multiply and birth new groups. After all, these communities are not just for us but also for others!

IV. HOW SHALL WE BUILD THESE MINI-COMMUNITIES? [Plan]

Only the gospel of grace can create the kind of community we hope to build. So our CGs engage in four **core activities** through which the grace of Jesus will flow to us and through us. This is a summary of what we *do* in our CGs. Keep in mind that these are not ends in themselves; community is the goal. Further, while each of these may not receive equal emphasis at any one gathering, a balance is expected over a series of CG meetings.

- **Study.** Our groups seek to be transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ encountered in scripture. Each week we “digest” the previous Sunday’s sermon together, discussing the Bible’s implications for our own lives as well as for our city and culture. In order to maximize the benefits of the small group setting, these discussions are to be *process-oriented*, rather than purely *answer-oriented* or *teaching-oriented*.
- **Prayer.** Each group sets aside time to pray for our individual needs and circumstances as well as for the needs of our city and world (kingdom prayer).
- **Relationships.** Group members develop authentic relationships with one another, sharing their lives and engaging in mutual care, accountability, and leisure. Our groups also strive to build relationships with those outside the Christian community, inviting friends, colleagues, and local neighbors to various community activities.
- **Service.** Group members serve the physical, material, and emotional needs of their “neighbors” both inside and outside the group. We extend deeds of compassion to group members (e.g., babysitting, moving help, meals, etc.), and serve our local neighbors and neighborhoods through neighborhood service activities conducted at least monthly.

CG **leaders**, who are trained and supported by the church elders, oversee community life. But by no means are they the only ones responsible for the group! Every member is expected to be actively engaged, giving of his or her time, gifts, and faith to build this community. Groups will also be supported by leader **apprentices**. These individuals assist with certain leadership responsibilities and may or may not become a group leader one day.

V. WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT ARE WE TRYING TO FOSTER? [Prayer]

What would it look like and feel like when the grace of God begins to shape our community life? Here are a few things worth dreaming about and praying for.

What would it look like for our CGs to see lives radically changed by Jesus? We might see people finding newfound freedom to be themselves. We might see people beginning to break patterns of sin, addiction, and flaws in character. Some may experience deep empathy and zeal for those outside the Christian community for the first time. Some may embrace the message of Christ for the first time. Others may start considering what it means to serve, not use, our city. Some may catch a new vision for their vocations — seeing their daily work in relation to God’s mission of redeeming his world.

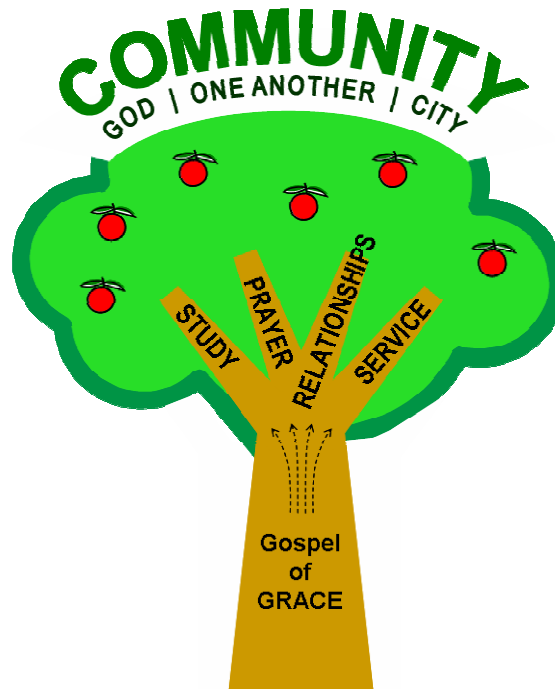
What would it look like for our CGs to see more authenticity and intimacy in our relationships? The gospel frees us from hiding our faults and weakness; we might begin to be free to be weak, needy, mediocre, and dumb before each other. We’d slowly tear down our professional masks and personal facades. We’d be emboldened to struggle in the plain view of others, ask hard questions, and dare to make mistakes — understanding that true community will be messy and unpredictable! We’d free others to repent and grow in our own ability to repent, forgive, and speak the truth to one another.

What would it look like for our CGs to have every member actively and joyfully engaged in community life? We’d foster communities in which every participant eagerly takes on the responsibility of caring for others. Our groups would be member-driven, not leader-driven. Working against the consumer mindset often found in small groups, we’d slowly cultivate a “giver mentality.” The first question we ask wouldn’t be “What am I getting out of this?” but “What am I giving to this group? Whom can I serve tonight?” Every individual with his or her unique personality, gifts, insights, and abilities would be prized as an indispensable instrument of grace in our community.

What would it look like for our CGs to have vibrant, dynamic relationships that “overflow” as a compelling witness to our city? We’d begin to foster communities that are attractive and accessible to new Christians and those looking into Christianity. We’d create a group environment in which people say, “This is a place I can bring my friend,” and people would actually do so. We’d gather friends that have honest questions and doubts, remembering ourselves what it was like to be “on the outside looking in.” We’d treat them with respect and hope, reminding ourselves what an unlikely recipient of grace we too are. Perhaps we’d walk the streets of our city differently — with new eyes, ears, and hearts, we begin to notice both its beauty and its brokenness. We’d care for the needs of our neighbors and neighborhoods as if they were our own.

SUMMARY DIAGRAM: THE CG TREE

This diagram may help you bring the pieces we just looked at into a coherent whole. You'll notice that in this picture our CGs are growing towards true **Community** — fruitful and flourishing relationships with God, one another, and the city. The *leaves and fruit* reflect this as the purpose and primary goal of our CGs. True community is nurtured and supported by the **grace of the gospel**, the *tree trunk*. This is our supernatural source of life and growth. The **Core Activities** (Study, Prayer, Relationships, Service) are the *branches* on the tree. They are the means (or ministry channels or avenues) through which the grace of the gospel will flow to us and *through* us as we build community life together. They are not in themselves the purpose of our CGs, but they are indispensable to our growth as a community.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I. WHY DO WE HAVE COMMUNITY GROUPS? [Purpose]

- Consider the three sets of relationships we hope our communities will nurture (God, one another, city). Which is your current CG the strongest at building? Weakest?
- How does understanding that a CG is more than a “Bible Study” and more than a mere “group” change your mindset and expectations of your CGs?

II. WHERE DO THESE GROUPS MEET? [Place]

- What are some benefits of a neighborhood-based group? Challenges? How do you think being closer to each other geographically facilitates both our relationships as well as our ministry to the city?
- What are some creative ways your CG might get to know and serve its surrounding neighborhood?

III. WHO ARE COMMUNITY GROUPS FOR? [People]

- How might grasping that your CG is to be “a community for others” re-shape your attitude toward or behavior in your CG?
- Are there ways your CG can be more accessible to and beneficial for those looking into the Christian faith?

IV. HOW SHALL WE BUILD THESE MINI-COMMUNITIES? [Plan]

- Which of the four “core activities” is your group strongest at? Weakest? What would it look like for you to achieve a better “balance among these...over a series of CG meetings”?

V. WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT ARE WE TRYING TO FOSTER? [Prayer]

- Keeping in mind that building this sort of community is a supernatural work of the Spirit, which pieces of the ideal community “environment” do you already see evidenced in your group? Which are less evident (areas needing growth)?
- What would it look like for your group to have a healthy “every member ministry” dynamic in it — i.e., each individual is actively involved in serving others and creating community life?
- How is this general picture of our CGs different from your previous experience of small groups in other churches or organizations? How might it shape or alter your expectations? Anything new that it might require of you?