



# Community Group Handbook

2023

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*Uniting People to Life in Christ*

# Community Groups

Community Groups serve as the introduction and pathway for Christian Community at Portico Church Arlington. They are groups varying in size, meeting location, demographics, and dynamics, but every Community Group is built on the rhythms of **relationship, word, and prayer**. The ultimate hope for every community group should be that the members of the group are introduced to the relational life of the church, exposed to the power of God's word, and have opportunity to be prayed for and to pray for other people.

## What is a Community Group?

A Community Group is a gathering of 4-20 people that serves as an anchor and introduction to Christian community.

- **Anchor:** Community Groups anchor Christian community because they are structured groups built on mutual commitment. They happen regularly, are somewhat predictable, and provide a consistent experience of what it looks like for Christians to love one another throughout the week.
- **Introduction:** Community Groups are the “front door” of Christian community. They are only an introduction because the depth, friendship, love, and care that the Gospel produces in Christians is something that is much deeper and substantial than a 2-hour meeting every other week. The groups are also open to newcomers, and hospitality oriented so that they can always introduce new people to the Christian community of Portico Church.

The Community Group ministry at Portico is one ministry of many at our church. A Community Group can in no way replace the church, worshipping with the church on Sundays, or the authority that is given to the Church through God's word. It is an extension of all those things. For this reason, people who are in Community Groups at Portico should be in some phase of the process of attending and belonging to the larger Portico family (worship attendance and/or church membership).

The purpose of Community Groups is to make and mature disciples of Christ who are following Jesus together in obedience to everything that he has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20), a command that he has given to every local church as a unity.

## What does a Community Group Do?

The practices of community groups reflect this understanding of community groups as an anchor and introduction to Christian community. Three essential marks of Christian Community that we see in scripture are relationship, word, and prayer. While there is more to Christian community than these three marks, these are the essential marks that allow for organic development of other activities (service and group mission/evangelism, etc.).

- **Relationship:** Each group will have practices that allow time and space for relationships to be developed. Depending on the make-up and leadership of the group, this may include a shared meal, icebreakers, informal discussion time over coffee/beverage, or congregating on a back porch. There are many ways to form and cultivate relationships, and different groups will do this in different ways, but all groups should have a culture of knowing and being known for everyone who comes to the group. In healthy groups, this means that new people and people who are less known are prioritized, and relational clicks are broken down so that everyone feels welcome. Group members should have a posture of wanting to get to know people they don't know, and seek opportunities to serve other people. Not: "What can I get out of group tonight?" but "How can I serve someone at group tonight?".
- **Word:** Each group will have a period of opening the word, reading the word out loud, and allowing people to share insights about how the Lord is speaking to them through the word. This time might be 5 minutes long for some groups with small children participating, or it could be a longer more in-depth time for groups with no children. The goal of this time is for people to meet the Lord in his word and share with others how they are responding to the Scriptures (feelings, actions, beliefs). This is not an in-depth bible study time where points of doctrine are debated, but should be a shared personal time of seeking God's word for his will. Group members should be intentional about reading the word and open to sharing what the word is working in their inner life.
- **Prayer:** Each group will spend time in prayer. Praying for the meal, praying for each other during the group, praying for the church, praying for significant events, etc. Prayer is a time for God's people to meet him and lift praise, request, and lament. Healthy groups will involve many different people praying and will involve many different types of prayers (not just praying for needs). Praying is an extension of the relational time that the group has together and the connection with the Lord through time in the word. We respond to the Lord by speaking to him as his children. Groups should spend more time praying their requests, praises, and laments, than they spend talking about them with each other as this brings the Lord into the conversation.

### *Discipleship Groups*

Many Groups will break into discipleship groups on "off-weeks". The purpose of these groups is to allow for a deeper experience of the same rhythms. These groups are gender-based and are typically smaller in size than a community group to help maintain a closer and more intimate feel. Discipleship groups typically study the word together, although from time to time, they may read a book or utilize another resource to study as well. Members of discipleship groups should be consistent, committed, and remain focused on serving the other people in the group rather than meeting their own needs or preferences.

## *Multiplication*

Another element that groups will often incorporate is multiplication. To remain focused on relationship and hospitality, a group that gets to a size where welcoming newcomers is hampered should seek to multiply. This is also a healthy reminder that our community groups can become an idol. When we want to protect our group or the experience that we have in our group above the call to welcome newcomers, it is a sign that the group has become a surrogate for Jesus instead of a means to point us to Jesus. Multiplication is an act of trusting God with our future as we disrupt something that may have become comfortable and allow him to disciple us into a new season.

Multiplication also is an act of training and developing new leaders to exercise the gifts that the Spirit gives to the church and it invites the entire group to adopt the mindset of Christ by seeking to be of service in pursuit of the main goal of making and maturing disciples.

### Steps of Multiplication:

1. Identify potential leaders and give them opportunities to lead. (Must be church members, in a season of life that will allow them to be healthy leaders).
2. Discuss plans to multiply with Pastoral Staff.
3. Talk with potential leaders about starting a group.
4. Determine specifics of day/time and when the group will become two.
5. Communicate no less than one month out to the group about the multiplication, allow for questions.
6. Get a sense from the group of which group members will be in which group.
7. Multiply and remind everyone that community group is only an introduction to Christian community, and that being in a different group than someone does not limit you being “in community” with them.

## *Yearly Rhythms*

Community Groups take regular breaks during the summer and holiday months. This is to allow leaders to rest, plan, and refresh, and it acknowledges the rhythms of life of our city. While there may be informal meetings, leaders should take a break from the regular pattern of their group to reflect and plan for the future of the group.

December + January—Community Group Break

February-June—Community Groups Meet

July + August—Community Groups Break

September-November—Community Groups Meet

## **Role of Leaders and Members in a Community Group**

Community Group Leaders are members of Portico Arlington who take responsibility for how a group functions and is maintained. Leaders should not be seen as gurus who have all of life’s answers or as service providers who offer community as a good and service to consumers. Instead, members of the

group should seek to support and assist the group leaders in every facet of the group and should follow the leaders in taking ownership of the group.

Grumbling about a community group experience is something that everyone has done, and it reveals a consumer mindset. Having the mindset of Christ in our community groups means that we lay aside our preferences and offer ourselves as servants of others. In this way leaders do not become burnt out by a group that attends only when they feel like it, or from people who come with an expectation of being served without a willingness to serve. Recognizing our weakness, imperfections, and sins, we are pursuing an ideal by the grace of God that we are invited to experience when we believe and apply the gospel to our life in community. The distinction between leader and member should be small in healthy and maturing groups, and every individual in the group should partner with the leaders in taking ownership of how the group functions.

## **Common Misconceptions about Community Groups**

Because many churches practice community groups as a ministry of their church, it is common to have people with a different understanding of community groups or come with different expectations about what will happen in a community group. Here are several descriptions of these misconceptions (none of these are bad or wrong, they just aren't what our community groups are designed to do.)

*Affinity Group.* No one says this, but probably the most common misconception about community groups that we experience is that of a person who is looking for good Christian friends, and so they join a group. With the epidemic of loneliness and how isolating the city can be, this is a very understandable desire and expectation. However, while Community Groups may introduce you to some people who become your friends, the limitations of the function and practices of the group make friendships an uncertain outcome. In other words, the group should not be defined as “good” or “bad” based on whether or not you make several friends in the group. Friendships are built on common interests, shared experiences, and mutual admiration, Christian Community is built on the reality of Christ's reconciling work.

*Bible Study.* Other people may approach community group with more of a bible study mentality. For this person, a group that goes very deep into the scriptures, centers more on academic discussion, and gives people opportunity to learn more and acquire a greater knowledge is what they are looking for in coming to a group. While our Community Groups do gather around the word, discuss scripture, and share knowledge, the type of sharing that occurs during a community group is more based on application (how we respond to the word), than interpretation. This will often mean that discussion does not get into the weeds of getting everyone to agree or to discover the correct meaning of the text which would be frustrating for someone who is expecting a bible study.

*Therapy Group.* Some people may view community group as a therapeutic group where an experience of healing is the goal, through sharing feelings and experiences and receiving affirmation from other people. This type of group will replace the relationship that the group has with the Lord with the experience that the group has with each other. Prayer and word will drift to the background and the margins of the group's experience, and the messiness of children will be an obstacle to the group instead of part of the way that God disciplines the whole group.

## Problem Solving and Leadership Structure

Because Christians continue to be hampered by indwelling sin, miscommunication, and weakness, there will be times in all groups where conflict, division, and concern for the group or a particular dynamic in the group happen. We should all expect this and enter those areas of conflict and concern trusting that what binds us together as fellow church members and brothers and sisters in Christ, will be enough to resolve and heal.

To support this practice of gospel-centered conflict resolution, there are a number of principles that everyone should apply with wisdom:

- **Specs and Planks (Matthew 7).** When we are quicker to identify the flaws in another person's life or become discontent with something that another person is doing, we are falling into the trap that Jesus rebukes in Matthew 7. We should always seek to identify where we have fallen short before thinking about the shortcomings of another. We should also seek to approach someone in conflict with a willingness to receive correction by not becoming defensive but being receptive and generous.
- **Anti-gossip.** If you have feedback or concerns about someone or something, go to the source instead of going to a friend or someone else to build a team. Talking *about* someone is never as fruitful as talking *to* someone. If your concern is not significant enough to have a difficult conversation with that person, then it is certainly not something that you need to bring up with other people. If you need wisdom/counsel on a particular situation, talk to a Pastor or leader and ask for advice on how you can be used in the situation instead of trying to bring the Pastor or leader into the situation instead.
- **Grace and Truth.** We are called to speak the truth in love to each other. To do this, we need to always remember the source of our grace and truth as Jesus our Lord and Savior. By remembering the source of grace and truth we humbly acknowledge that we are in deep need of grace and truth ourselves. Our aim must always be to build up and not to tear down. To bring to light and heal rather than hide and destroy.
- **Humble Courage.** Entering difficult conversations is hard and we can either avoid them or harden ourselves with pride and arrogance and go in to "win" the conversation. The way of Jesus offers the alternative of humble courage. Because we are still sinners, we will never do this perfectly and should remain open to being wrong, doing something without the proper level of sensitivity or perspective, and being ignorant. Because we are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, we have power over sin and can have life-giving words to offer people during discomfort and conflict. With this principle we do not shrink back from an opportunity to bring life to someone and neither do we seek to tear someone down.

Community Group Leaders are organized under the authority of the elders at Portico and join the rest of the church members in submitting to them in the Lord (Hebrews 13:17). If there is a concern that cannot be resolved within the group, the elders are a resource for coming alongside and seeking reconciliation and healing.