



Philosophy of Community

1 Thessalonians 2:8 – “We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

OUR VISION FOR COMMUNITY

Our Community Ministries are our main (though not exclusive) method of teaching and shepherding. We aim for both breadth and depth—helping more people go deeper with Christ:

- Executing the role of shepherds that Jesus requires of us (1 Peter 5:1-5)
- Teaching our people all that Jesus calls us to teach them (Matthew 28:20)

Our vision for community is that our church would be a place where every member would have deep life-changing connections with others in our church, where community would be lived out as it is preached. We desire all members and regular attenders to experience grace-filled relationships with those who know Jesus – relationships where they are known, loved, and served wherever they are on their spiritual journey.

We pray that every member would have at our church:

Shepherding

- An elder of the church shepherding the member in his or her walk with Christ.

Connections

- Friends who know our real struggles and who see our real lives, not just our public lives.
- Friends who step alongside in the crises of life and share the joys of life.
- Friends who would recognize if he or she had been absent for more than a few weeks.
- Friends who will together pursue a life of faith in the gospel, living out the life to which Jesus calls us.

Teaching

- A good grasp of the Bible’s teaching, able to discern true and false doctrine.
- The ability to correctly apply the Bible to life’s challenges and decisions.

WHAT IS GOSPEL COMMUNITY?

“Community” can exist in many places, and genuine community is hardly unique to the church world. Further, by being Christians in the world (though not of it) we encourage our members to be broadly

involved throughout their multiple communities. Doing so is a major way we carry the gospel out into the world.

Community in a church, however, is something more specific – it will share many aspects with broader instances of community (whether sports teams, civic organizations, neighborhood groups, etc.), but community in a church is specifically Christian community. Our vision is for our church to be a community focused on *Sharing the Gospel* and *Sharing Lives*.

In the first four verses of 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, the three authors of the letter, twice use the term “the gospel.” The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ – born of a virgin, crucified, buried, and risen – and that gospel is what unites a Christian community. We are a community formed around a message. We are a community founded upon and formed by grace – the grace of sin forgiven by the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We are those who trust in his name and receive salvation by grace through faith alone.

A community founded upon and formed by grace is not mere doctrinal conformity, but one in which we share lives. 1 Thessalonians 2 has a strong sense of deep love and care for each person. To Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy those in the Thessalonian church were not a project or an audience. They were shared friends. The gospel binds together people of every different race, language, background and style – united by grace.

And we aspire that we would not simply share a confession, but a life together. In so doing, we are simply following Jesus’ own method, his three years of caring for twelve disciples, because life change happens when another shares his or her life with us. We pray that our culture of care for each other would be *Tenacious*, *Vulnerable*, and *Authentic*, just as Jesus himself was in his care for his disciples.

OUR COMMUNITY PHILOSOPHY

There are many ways community can be achieved in a church, any of which are potentially good choices. Our strategy for community, therefore, is not meant to be a critique of other churches who pursue community via different structures, but merely our practical choice of how we go about this vision and philosophy. There are four principles that inform this practical choice:

- *One Church.* We are gathered as one church (meeting at multiple times and at multiple locations) under the preaching of the Word and the sacraments, God’s most fundamental ways of changing us.
- *Many Small Groups.* Given the size of our church, community requires connections in smaller groups. Just as the apostles in Acts 6 saw the need for greater organization to serve a numerically-growing church, we will only succeed in community if we organize into many smaller units.
- *The Need for a Dominant Ministry Model.* Any organization must make decisions to focus on some items (and therefore not focus on others). We simply cannot be good at every possible ministry or item, so we must choose – without criticizing other models – what model we use to focus our efforts at community.

- *Execution Over Strategy.* The most important factor in our community strategy is not the strategy itself, but our execution of that strategy. The best strategy in the world, if not executed, is definitionally a failure. For that reason we will work to move to action quickly.

“Age and Stage” for Developmental Categories

We are not broadly an “age and stage” church – one that unnecessarily introduces subdivisions into the body of Christ. We do, however, recognize that there are developmental stages in the growth of a human being that last all the way through being a young adult, and those developmental stages do necessitate different ministries for different ages. You do not teach a five-year-old the same way you teach a senior in high school. For that reason, we do have age-specific ministries when there are particular developmental reasons to do so. Each such ministry has its own ministry-specific strategy and philosophy in line with our overall church vision:

- Nursery
- Children’s Ministry
- Student Ministries
- College Ministry
- The Capital Fellows Program

Young Adult Ministry is a blend – there are still developmental stages in one’s 20s, so we do maintain a ministry that particularly focuses on young adults, however the role of the Young Adult Ministry is to help young adults integrate into the larger ministry model of our church. Similarly, as there are issues that come with aging, we do maintain a Senior Saints Ministry, but again the goal of that is to enable senior saints to, as much as possible, remain integrated with the larger body of Christ in our church.

The Fabric of Discipleship for Adult Ministry

We work our adult ministry with the metaphor of weaving a fabric, the fabric of discipleship in our church. As we weave this fabric, we are attempting to create a solid net that will keep those God brings to us from “falling through the cracks.” A woven fabric has a warp and a weft. The warp threads are held straight and taught on the loom, while the weft threads are passed over and under, creating a piece of fabric.



The warp for us is our “main” ministry model of Community Groups (CGs). Any organization must make decisions to focus on some items (and therefore not focus on others). We simply cannot be good at every possible ministry or item, so we must choose – without criticizing other models – what model we use to focus our efforts at community. Given the size and geographical dispersion of our congregation, this is the strategy we think most likely to shepherd our congregation well.

That said, we recognize that any ministry model has its weaknesses, and we should be very self-aware of the potential weaknesses of a CG ministry model. Therefore, we have the weft. The weft is our supporting ministry models (Renewal Groups, Adult Ed, Men’s Ministry, Women’s Ministry, etc.). These models are not designed to compete with our main ministry model, as they would then cause confusion and conflict over resources and direction. Instead, they are designed to supplement the main ministry model of CGs, thereby weaving a tight fabric of discipleship that will catch those who would “fall through the cracks” of the warp alone.

OUR COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

We focus our efforts under the two categories of Care and Spiritual Formation. The distinction between these two areas is entirely pragmatic, as they resist any attempt to draw lines. (Caring for someone well in the gospel involves their spiritual formation, and helping form someone into the image of Christ involves caring for that person.) Therefore, many activities in Care could equally well be part of Formation and vice versa.

As we are conformed into the image of Christ, that change happens in mind, heart, and behavior (Deut. 6:5), and we therefore seek to build ministries that bring change in all areas of our lives. By means of providing focus, we particularly want to disciple our congregation well in five key areas:

- Growth in Personal Godliness: Helping our Congregation Grow in Personal Faith
- Growth in Stewardship: Helping our Congregation Effectively Steward God’s Gifts
- Growth in Relationships: Helping our Congregation Approach Human Relationships Correctly, Whatever Each Person’s Personal Situation
- Growth in Identity: Helping our Congregation Place Their Identity in Christ
- Growth in the World: Helping Our Congregation Live as Christians in the World

Community Groups

We seek to be conformed into the image of Christ together, via Real Connections in Small Groups.

Our community ministries staff and budgets focus primarily on our dominant ministry model of Community Groups. Community Groups are the main means by which our leadership shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-4) the flock that is our church, and our goal is for all members to be in a community group. Given the size and geographical dispersion of our congregation, this is the strategy we think most likely to achieve our community vision. Further, though we would prefer all members to be in a community group, we recognize that for a variety of reasons this does not always occur—so independents are assigned to our shepherding structure (though practically we will not be able to provide the same level of proactive care as those in community groups receive).

Community groups are led by church members, meet at least twice monthly, ideally in members' homes, and are our primary means of connection, fellowship, and friendship. Community groups should be the first line of contact for various forms of support – hospital visits, help in crises, spiritual mentoring, etc.¹ We encourage groups that begin to grow too large to multiply, planting new groups so that more can be welcomed into life changing fellowship.

Renewal Groups and Counseling

We also recognize that certain issues are too heavy to be dealt with in a community group context, whether due to the specific nature of the issues involved or due to the amount of attention required for care in this area. For that reason, we provide various Renewal Groups that focus on support or healing in a specific area (e.g.: Divorce Care, Grief Share, Sexual Addictions, etc.). These groups are not meant to be replacements for community groups, but instead serve as supports in specific areas where a community group may not be sufficient support. Similarly, the church provides various forms of counseling to our members when more targeted support is required, and we offer mentoring and other life-on-life ministry models (e.g.: our Stephen Ministry) that will supplement, not replace, community groups as our main way of shepherding our church.

¹ Note that Community Groups are NOT desired to be the first line of defense for the financial support of members, as financial issues often require specific expertise and a more holistic plan of support. Community groups are therefore asked to refer financial needs to the Board of Deacons.

Adult Education

Fully recognizing the “fuzzy line” between care and formation, we ask our community groups and other caring groups to focus first on being communities for care and shepherding. That said, we recognize that spiritual growth includes learning more about our faith in a way that will support a full life change (not just mental assent to various statements). Further, we recognize that Christians do believe certain things and do not believe other things, and Christ commanded his church to teach “all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

For this reason, we provide two types of Adult Education:

- Modular classes: A series of modular adult education classes via The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture, a ministry of the Capital Pres Family.
- Ongoing classes: Ongoing Sunday School classes designed to welcome visitors and to provide community as well as teaching.

These classes are not meant to compete with community groups nor with volunteering for our members’ time, but they are meant to provide teaching that will help our members can grow in understanding of our faith.