

“LifeGroups Unveiled”

Acts 2:42-47

Introduction

- [Slide #1] The world's largest flower, called Rafflesia, can grow as large as one meter in diameter and it can weigh up to 10 kilograms, that's 22 pounds. It's really quite impressive and even beautiful. The problem is it also smells like rotting flesh. To botanists it's affectionately known as the stinking corpse flower. Flies that normally swarm around mounds of dead flesh are attracted to Rafflesia. There's one more interesting thing about this flower. It has no roots, no stems, and no leaves.
- Here's the deal. The church, at times, reminds me of Rafflesia. Hang with me on this one. What we do on Sunday morning, when Christians gather together corporately, publicly, for celebration, the worship, that is the flower of Christianity. Like a flower it is the visible part of Christianity, the fragrant part that people see and notice. And it's beautiful. There is something so amazing and wonderful about God's church gathered together to worship.
- But what we do on Sunday morning is just part of the plant. God's design for his church is not just for this gargantuan flower. God's design for his church is that this beautiful flower might also have roots and stems and leaves; all equally important parts of the plant just maybe a bit less noticeable, a bit less public if you will. Problems come when the church starts functioning like Rafflesia—all flower, all show and no stem, no root system, no leaves. When that happens Christ's church ends up stinking.
- Right now, unless we become very intentional about some things as a church, we are in danger of becoming a Rafflesia, good things happening on Sunday morning but no roots, no stem, no leaves. As author Neil Cole puts it, “It amazes me to consider how much effort and how many resources (time, money, and people) are expended for a single hour once a week. We have made church nothing more than a religious show that takes place on Sunday, and after it's done we all go home, until church starts again next week, same time, same place.” Cole asks, and I would second his question, “Is this what the bride of Christ is?”¹
- There is so much more to the Christian life—so much more than just Sunday morning. Today I want to talk to you about what we hope to do as a church in order to be more balanced—to be more plant like and not just a big flower. [Slide #2] Enter **LifeGroups**.

Transition

Before I explain **LifeGroups**, I need to explain how we've arrived at this point.

- For me personally, this journey toward **LifeGroups** began at Wheaton as a college student. During the revival at Wheaton in March of 1995 God impressed upon my heart a model of ministry that balances both the Transcendent and Imminent aspects of God's character. [Slide #3] Those are just fancy words for describing God the

¹ Neil Cole, *Organic Church*, p. xxv.

Most High—transcendence, and the God who comes near—immanence. At the revival God poured out his Most High character, his holiness and his greatness and his glory and his perfection—all the things we aren't—and when you see God for who he really is you are changed for life. But God didn't leave us wallowing in our sin. At the moment of our deepest need He came close, in the midst of, as friend and met us with the grace, mercy and forgiveness of the cross of Christ.

- [Slide #4] What does that have to do with **LifeGroups**? It has everything to do with **LifeGroups**. What I've learned is that the church structure must reflect God's nature. Our life as the church must reflect this twofold aspect of God's character, transcendence and immanence, if we are to bring him glory. For those of you who have been to the church website and seen this curious phrase, "celebrating the character of God corporately, passionately living with Jesus in community"—that is simply an attempt to put into words this desire to balance these two aspects. God the Most High—transcendence—Sunday morning celebrating the character of God. And the God who comes near—immanence—intimate, incarnate, accessible, close—**LifeGroups** during the week. The flower part of church life, Sunday morning, is where God's character is exalted—transcendence. The **LifeGroups** are the stems and the roots and the leaves where God becomes immanent, close, incarnate. One without the other is incomplete—it's like Rafflesia—it rots, it stinks.
- I also don't want you to get the impression that **LifeGroups** are my brainchild; something I've just whipped up to meet a current and pressing need. This model of ministry is all over the pages of Scripture—it is simply a reflection of the gospel. God planted the seed back in 1995 and the idea for **LifeGroups** has been blossoming ever since.
- I remember the conversations I had with the search committee before Miriam and I came here and we were talking **LifeGroup**-like ideas but not fully understanding what those ideas might actually look like. I remember conversations with Bruce Kaasa and Vincent Escandell at Country Kitchen making napkin drawings of a small group system and not fully understanding those drawings were of **LifeGroups**. I remember the article I wrote for the church newsletter back in November 2005. And I quote...
- "As I survey our church, I believe the single biggest need we have in order to bring this body of Christ to maturity is the development of a small group way of life. Not simply a small group ministry, but an ethos, a way of life in which small groups are the heartbeat driving all the other ministries. What's missing when I look at this church through the lens of Scripture? Relational interconnectedness. We are too isolated to our own detriment! We are sorely lacking in opportunities for a dynamic life on life experience, in which people are able to encourage, sharpen, teach, and edify one another through fellowship in God's Word and in prayer. This vision for ministry is not radical, innovative, or unique. It's tried and true. It's as old as the early church. But it's absolutely essential if we are serious about being The Church and not simply a country club. I believe the development of a small group strategy that is now underway is the single-most significant development in the ministry of

this church since I came as pastor almost two and one-half years ago. It is far more significant than the building program.”² That was an early vision of **LifeGroups**.

- Our first crude attempt at **LifeGroups** was with the 10 Keys bible studies. Bruce Kaasa, Lem Seow and I then took what we learned from that experience and refined the idea for **LifeGroups**. And these last few years we’ve been trying to put in place the values and theology that will support the **LifeGroups**. But as we all know, values and theology aren’t enough. **William Beckham** says, “Church values are not the problem, neither is theology. The problem is the lack of a viable design through which the values and theology can be lived out.”³ And that’s what **LifeGroups** provide.
- So let’s talk about **LifeGroups**? [**Slide #5**] Of all the things we could become as a church, why **LifeGroups**? There are three options for us as a church as I see it. We are at a crossroads. As **M. Scott Boren** says, “We can fight to reestablish the church as a physical place where certain things happen. We can work harder to compete with society, to out-entertain and lure people in with as much pomp and circumstance as a church can afford. Or, we can become a church on a mission.”⁴ He goes on to say, “Church is not something that people do one day a week. Church is something people belong to and take with them wherever they go. The call of the church is to send itself.”⁵ The last option, a church on a mission, is the only viable option. **LifeGroups** are by no means a magic cure all for what ails us but they will help us to be missional.
- So why now? The plan to roll out **LifeGroups** now is in part the desire to address a weakness in our body—the need to be more missional and more relational. But the plan to roll out **LifeGroups** now is also in response to what we’ve heard from you over the past months. I’ve talked to many of you who’ve requested something like this and I’m very pleased to be able to take the wraps off and start talking about **LifeGroups**. Do we have everything figured out? No. We’ve got a lot to learn. There still needs to be some tweaking of the **LifeGroup** model. But I can say this. **LifeGroups** are the most unique, exciting, and significant thing I’ve been a part of in my entire Christian life.
- There’s a brochure in your bulletin that answers a lot of questions about **LifeGroups**. I want to encourage you to carefully read through that document. Chew on it. Write down comments. This week call me, email me, ask me questions. During the meeting after the service some of us who’ve been testing out a prototype **LifeGroup** will be up front as part of a panel to answer your questions. Be thinking of questions to ask during that time. But for the next few minutes I want to focus on some of the distinctives of **LifeGroups**.
- [**Slide #6**] First of all, what are they? What are **LifeGroups**? **LifeGroups** are the basic unit of Christian community at Grace. They are groups of 6-15 people committed to being the Church as established by Christ. His words, works and

² Grace Community Church Newsletter, November, 2005.

³ William Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, p. 60-1.

⁴ M. Scott Boren, *Making Cell Groups Work*, p. 77-8.

⁵ M. Scott Boren, *Making Cell Groups Work*, p. 73 and p.76.

teachings provide the basis for life together. These groups function as witnessing communities demonstrating the love of Christ. As the groups grow and leaders are mentored additional **LifeGroups** are launched.

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[Slide #7] There are a few things in this definition that make **LifeGroups** different. Yes, there are many similarities to traditional small groups but also some unique and significant twists. Let me spend a few minutes highlighting some of those differences.

Main Point

- **First** is the relative importance of **LifeGroups** in the overall life of the church. It's very important that you understand **LifeGroups** are not a new church program. They are the life of the church—an extension of the celebration that takes place on Sunday morning. They're micro churches. There is a huge difference between being a church with small groups and a church of small groups. The vision is for the latter.
- **Second**, so many small groups meet in the name of everything but in the name of Jesus. They meet in the name of Bible study, in the name of fixing people's problems, in the name of fellowship. All good things. But in **LifeGroups** the presence of Christ must permeate everything about that gathering. **LifeGroups** seek and savor Christ. We want Jesus to be the agenda.⁶
- **Third**, most small groups are closed to outsiders. In other words, they are very uncomfortable places for non-believers. They become holy huddles and they stagnate. **LifeGroups** are the opposite. One of the chief aims of a **LifeGroup** is to bring people to Christ. They are witnessing communities. And as they experience conversion growth, as new leaders are nurtured and disciplined, eventually, the **LifeGroup** grows to where it can multiply; two new groups are birthed from that one. They're the place you bring your non-believing family and friends. They literally are the front door to Christ's living church.
- **Fourth**, **LifeGroups** are where we share life together. There's no need to have it all together in order to be a part of a **LifeGroup**. In fact, the more real and transparent and broken we are with one another and before God, the better. **LifeGroups** are the place to share life. That's the picture of Christianity in Acts 2:42-27. There is a relational component to Christianity that is unavoidable. Did you know there are seventeen one another commands in the New Testament—things we are to be doing regularly to and for one another? **LifeGroups** are the place to live those out. **LifeGroups** are the way we are going to become more relational as a church.

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Let me say a bit about some of the things **LifeGroups** will be doing each week.

[Slide #8] There are four main priorities: upward, inward, outward, and forward.

- Each week **LifeGroups** will seek to focus their attention **upward**—this is the priority of worship. Time in God's word is part of this. There will be a common curriculum based on the passage of Scripture from Sunday morning. Prayer is part of this.

⁶ M. Scott Boren, *Making Cell Groups Work*, p. 133.

Worship is not what we do as Christians it's who we are. **LifeGroups** provide a place for us to lead lives of worship.

- **LifeGroups** will focus their attention **inward**—this is the priority of relationships. This is where we carry one another's burdens and share life together. It's where we build deep, connected and significant relationships. We've seen this happen in our prototype. We've gone from being a **LifeGroup** to having **LifeBuds**.
- Each week **LifeGroups** will focus their attention **outward**—this is the priority of love for non-believers. Seeing the lost come to Christ is a key part of what it means to be in a **LifeGroup**. **LifeGroups** provide a safe, non-threatening, organic way for evangelism to happen. **Kevin Offner** sums up **LifeGroups** when he says "the greatest apologetic for Christianity is not a well-reasoned argument but a wildly loving community."⁷ That's **LifeGroups**.
- Lastly, **LifeGroups** will focus their attention **forward**—this is the priority of discipleship. The success of **LifeGroups** is heavily dependent on new leaders being brought to maturity in their walk with Christ. There can only be as many **LifeGroups** as there are leaders to lead them. One of the things I'm most excited about is that **LifeGroups** will release people to do the work of the ministry. But that takes time. The reason **LifeGroups** may be slow in rolling out from this point forward is because it takes time for people to mature.

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At this time I want to invite Jan Hirschy [[Slide #9](#)], Bruce Kaasa [[Slide #10](#)], and Bob Hirschy [[Slide #11](#)] to share a few more details with you.

Conclusion

- [[Slide #12](#)] Let me say one final thing. If you've been listening and you're excited, great. I'm rejoicing with you. But if you're not quite ready for a **LifeGroup**, that's okay too. No pressure. There's still a place for you here. And while we'll encourage everyone to be a part of a **LifeGroup** no one will look down on you if you're not part of one.
- Our mission as a church is to spread the fame and glory of God's name among all people. How are we going to do that? By celebrating the character of God corporately—that's the flower. And by passionately living with Jesus in community, that's **LifeGroups**—the stem and leaves and roots. *So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field.*⁸ May the lives planted in this little plot of earth called Grace Community Church grow into something beautiful for His glory. Let's pray.

⁷ Jimmie Long, *Generating Hope*, InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 200.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:7, 9