

First Baptist  
Church of Afton

Connect Group  
Handbook

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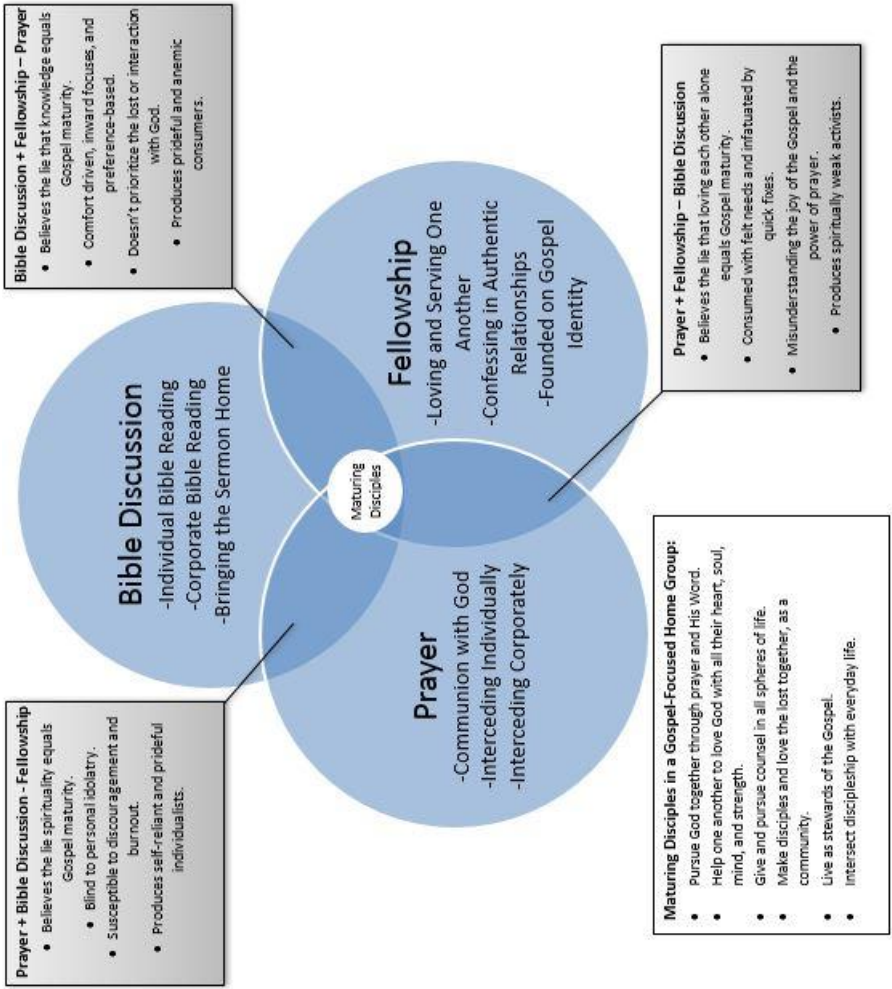
## *Connect Groups Overview*

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**FBC Afton Connect Groups exist to connect with God and others through fellowship, prayer, and Bible discussion.**

- 1. Discipleship:** We want to be constantly growing disciples at FBC Afton (Col. 2:6-7,19). Scripture reveals a community of Gospel-focused believers who grow together spiritually while also making more disciples (Acts 2:40-47). By doing life together missionally the Holy Spirit empowers the church to transform our town and the nations, our generation and the next. Connect groups do not exist for the good of the group, but for Jesus and His mission. Connect groups will spend time in the Word but it is more than just a Bible study that simply acquires more Bible knowledge. Care and exhortation should be present in Connect groups but the Connect groups are about more than just supporting one another (Heb. 3:13).
- 2. Authenticity:** Connect groups designate focused time for the following three vital areas of the Christian life that are simple yet sustainable; fellowship, prayer, and Bible discussion. These groups will help members intentionally develop relationships focused on the Gospel and hold one another accountable to Christ and His Word.

**3. Shared Ownership:** God's Word exhorts all believer to contribute and take ownership of the health, discipleship, and mission of the church. It also rebukes disciples that are not living out Jesus' teaching (Mt. 12:49-50, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 2:19). Creating roles within Connect groups provides an opportunity to empower and train member in the character and competencies of disciple-making and leadership. Young disciples need opportunities to lead in an environment that allows for feedback and coaching. This will also guard against burnout for Connect group leaders caused by the burden that can come from the expectation that they are to lead every aspect of a Connect group.



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## *Bible Discussion*

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**Bible Discussion is a time to observe truths, understand who we are, and apply how we are to live from the Word of God.**

Why do we need Bible Discussion?

- To prioritize understanding truths of Scripture and communing with God in community. (Isaiah 55:10-11, Romans 10:17, Matthew 4:4, John 15:7)
  - Intentionally growing in knowledge of God's Word in community is the key for community and individual growth as a disciple of Jesus.
- Growth and transformation. (2 Tim. 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, Psalm 19:7-11)
  - The Bible is living and active, and the Holy Spirit uses it to work supernaturally in the hearts of the group to produce growth, transformation, and unified community.
- To develop mature believers who can apply the Bible to how they live. (1 Cor. 3:2, Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 2:1-3, 2 Tim. 2:15)
  - Many Christians assume fellow church members interpret the Bible the same. By participating in these discussions, it will reveal differences fellow believers have promoting unity through diversity.



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## *Fellowship*

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**Fellowship creates an informal space for having fun, deepening relationships, and sharing life.**

### Why do we need Fellowship?

The deeper our relationships grow, the better we will be able to apply the Gospel in one another's lives. As people gather around God's Word as a spiritual family, it will be clear that Jesus is the one we are gathered around and who is gathering us. When Jesus instituted the Church, He created a spiritual family. The goal of fellowship is to move a group from strangers to acquaintances to family, from those with shared interests to those who love and care for one another.

Fellowship is a meal shared around a table that is uninterrupted by agenda and technology, it is playing games together in an interactive and engaging environment, it is spending quality time together in whatever unique fashion your group takes. We do encourage sharing meals together specifically because this environment allows us to get to know one another on a different level than just studying the Bible together. As you eat, have conversations about everything, and help one another see how Jesus is the center of every part of our lives.

### Fellowship Tips

- Have fun or eat a snack: the goal is to have fun and connect. Start with a meal but get creative.
- Intentionally invest in people and ask questions: Do not just react during fellowship. Pray before fellowships start, and ask God to give you insight into who He wants you to encourage or invest in.
- Intersect Fellowship do not add. Fellowship can easily be intersected with your normal schedule. Try eating a meal together before your Bible Discussion begins. Head out to lunch one weekend after the worship service. Intersect your fellowship with things you are already doing, rather than adding another event to your calendar. (But do not be afraid to add events if it fits your group).

### Examples of Fellowship

- A meal together before a Bible discussion or after a Sunday worship service.
- A cookout or party at someone's house
- Attend an event together.
- Anything where the Connect group is present that allows members to interact with each other informally.
- Note: Although going to the movies may produce conversation through a shared experience it is not the type of fellowship we are pursuing; include a meal, making your own home movie, or the drive-ins will encourage deeper relational development.

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## *Prayer*

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**Prayer Time is a time to bring one another's needs and praises before God and to apply the Gospel to our hearts and grow deeper in the Gospel through community.**

### Why do we need Prayer?

1. Reveal "Gospel gaps" and blind spots: Paul Tripp describes change as a "community project" (see Eph. 2:14-16). God never intended for sanctification to occur in isolation. Discipleship happens through meaningful relationship. As relationships are deepened through fellowship and our understanding of God's Word is sharpened through Bible discussion, times of intercession ensures time to invest in each other's spiritual lives and to help reveal "blind spots" to sin we all have in our lives.
2. Time to renew our minds: Paul exhorts us to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2). We grow primarily by reminding one another of Gospel truth. We all need a time to talk openly and candidly about what God is doing in our lives. Hebrews 3:12-13 warns that we often forget who God is and what He has done for us in Christ. Encouraging "one another daily" helps us to not be deceived and hardened by sin.

3. Increased authenticity leads to more vulnerability, confession, and accountability: Gender-specific prayer times create a smaller setting within the Connect group that facilitates vulnerability and prevents the seclusion or silence that is easier in larger, mixed-gender settings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states it this way: “In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation...in confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart.” The overall goal of a dedicated time of prayer is to foster discipleship relationships that help each person to grow to become more like Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

#### The Basic Elements of Prayer

Once a month divide your group into men and women for one entire meeting. You could include a shortened time like this in your regular weekly meetings but do not forsake praying as an entire group to accomplish this. The increased intimacy will facilitate asking the following prayer guide questions and provide more time for every member of your group to engage in the conversation and intercession.

Here are the questions:

1. What are you experiencing in life? (Describe current emotions, events, and relationships in life.)
2. Why are you experiencing this? (Express what you believe God's role and the role of others is.)
3. How should I respond? (Repent any sins, reconcile any wrongs, and praise God for all blessings.)
4. What does the Gospel say about this?

These questions are not exhaustive in themselves but provide a framework for your group to continually ask good, diagnostic questions. The benefit from asking these three questions for any emotion, event, or relational experience is to train your heart and brain in responding.

1. Share by asking, "What am I experiencing?": The first step in helping one another apply the Gospel to our hearts is to share and discuss what we are currently experiencing in relationships, emotions, and circumstances. Intercession requires that everyone come prepared to contribute—sharing their own struggles and helping others process theirs. Everyone must come ready to ask (and invite) questions.
2. Apply the Gospel by asking, "Why are you experiencing this?": Before rushing to solutions, we must assess how our heart (belief) is engaged in the struggles and circumstances we have shared. We must think about our "vertical" relationships with

God before our “horizontal” relationships with people, circumstances, and struggles. Helping one another apply the Gospel requires that we deal first with our vertical relationship, only secondarily evaluating our responses to horizontal circumstances. Everyone must come ready to speak (and receive) the truth in love.

3. Let the Gospel dictate “How you should respond” to circumstances and struggles: We all tend to respond to the circumstances in our lives. A baby cries, we feed him. The coffee tastes bitter, we add sugar. If we jump too quickly into spiritual solutions without assessing spiritual problems, we will run into trouble. We need to help each other develop a plan of action or accountability that presses deeper than surface solutions—presses into our beliefs instead of just our actions. We need to acknowledge, claim (or confess), and turn from our sin. The power that defeats sin in our lives is the Gospel. The Gospel is clearest when it is shared (and received) in community. At this time, the group should begin by praising God for this Gospel truth, then begin bringing the responses to questions one and two before Him in prayer.

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## *Missional Hangouts*

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**Missional Hangouts are informal and fun gatherings that allow Connect Groups to invest in their non-Christian friends together.**

### What is a Missional Hangout?

We have many children's events where we encourage and reward children for inviting an unsaved friend but an epidemic in the Church in the U.S. is that adults do not participate in this activity (outside of the occasional Sunday morning invitation). Missional Hangouts are opportunities for your entire group (adults included) to participate in this practice together. This is a much more natural and less intimidating way to practice evangelism. Think of these hangouts as your group hosting a party for your non-Christian friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family. They can be dinner out, board games in, bowling in Bainbridge, etc. Whatever you choose to do, the purpose is for each member of your group to invite a non-Christian friend to attend.

Missional Hangouts are not group evangelism sessions (as fun as *that* sounds). Instead, they are opportunities for your group to model the love that is found only in Christ to the non-Christians you already know. That means your group will have to be demonstrating that love. These hangouts provide an opportunity for

different members of your group to engage in casual and spiritual conversations with those you are seeking to share the Gospel with. Studies have shown that the average Christian hears the Gospel eight times before they place their faith in Christ.

### Why do we need Missional Hangouts?

- Intentional growth in evangelism as a community:  
To grow as holistic disciples of Jesus, we must help one another grow as people who regularly share the Gospel. The goal is not to see how many people our group can lead to faith in Christ (but that would not be a bad reward), instead we want to help one another move relationships with non-Christians toward spiritual and Gospel conversations. Sometimes it is easier to have a more forward spiritual conversation with someone you've just met than someone you've lived beside for years. That is the beauty of doing these hangouts.
- Build relational capital and friendships with non-Christians: Your non-Christian friends and neighbors are increasingly less likely to see their need for the Gospel or even to accept an invitation to church. Therefore, as ambassadors of the Gospel, we need to pursue non-Christians on "neutral turf" to build friendships and share the truth of the Gospel. Hangouts are a safe and fun way to invite non-Christian co-workers, neighbors, and friends to hang out and build relational capital. (Col. 4:5-6)



- Live on mission together and not alone: In John 13:34-35, Jesus taught that Christians' love for each other testifies to our heavenly Father. He said that our love was one of the most powerful and attractive apologetics to the lost world. Evangelism is effective in community because we are all gifted in different ways, and there is synergy when we work together. Hangouts provide younger disciples with an opportunity to see a model for disciple-making. They also create a simple way for Connect groups to live in community while investing in each other's personal ministry. (Matthew 28:18-20)

#### Missional Hangout Principles

- Intentional: Hangouts are planned to allow time for Connect group members to invite people, especially their non-Christian friends.
- Communal effort: Hangouts create opportunities for Connect groups to invest in each other's friendships with lost people.
- Fun: Hangouts should be fun for the Connect group *and* your non-Christian friends.
- Follow-up: Hangouts are only part of your relationship with a non-Christian. Therefore, everyone who invites a friend should follow up with that person. This shows that you care about the person more than his or her attendance at the event.

### Critical Perspective

- The “win” is in the invite: Only God can make the seeds we sow produce life and bring the dead to life. Our job is not to change hearts or make people come; our job is simply to make the invitation. Inviting someone to something fun with your friends shows care and effort, whether that person accepts the invitation, or not. Oftentimes, most people decline invites two or three times before accepting. Keep on asking.
- Beware of the “lack of margin” barrier: A busy schedule is one of the greatest barriers to living on mission. Saying “yes” to too many good things prevents Connect groups from investing deeply or saying “yes” to the best things.

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## *Shared Ownership*

### Why Sharing Roles is essential for Connect Groups.

- Helps prevent burnout.
- Creates a stronger discipleship culture. More roles give your group more people who are committed, creating stronger ownership.
- New Connect group members and less mature Christians can begin to serve right away. New Christians can become involved in a role early on instead of standing on the sidelines watching until they feel “ready.”
- Provides an opportunity to train others in a safe environment. New disciples need opportunities with feedback and coaching to grow.
- Creates a pipeline for developing new Connect group leaders, allowing for healthier Connect group multiplication.
- Helps Connect groups avoid becoming personality driven. Gospel community is center and forefront in our groups, rather than the talent, charisma, and drive of a leader.

### How do you Share Ownership?

1. Plan to share roles of the group from the beginning.
2. Invite and challenge group members to embrace specific roles.
3. Create teams to take on certain roles.
4. Celebrate when someone accepts a role.

### Potential Roles

- Bible Discussion Facilitator: Facilitate the Connect group through Bible Discussion. The Connect group leader typically will serve in this role, but he or she could encourage another from the Connect group to facilitate the Bible Discussion.
- Prayer Monitor (male and female): Prepare and monitor prayer times during the Connect group meetings. A female and male monitor are both needed. The prayer monitors also advocate for prayer, emphasizing the Connect group's prioritization of prayer at every meeting.
- Missional Coordinator: Keep the Connect group accountable to proactively schedule, pray for, and invite lost friends to hangouts.
- Food Team: This role could be held by one or more Connect group members. This team helps the Connect group schedule, plan, and organize food for meetings.
- Host: This role can be held by multiple Connect group members that can host Connect group at their home.
- Planner/Communicator: Help Connect group stay informed and up to date on upcoming meetings, details, and prayer requests.

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## *How to Birth a New Connect Group from Your Group*

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When you identify potential new leaders in your group (or they mention interest in leading a Connect group), invite these prospective leaders to take on a variety of roles (Bible Discussion Facilitator, Host, etc.). Make sure that when they take on a given role, you are there to give feedback and help them grow. It is best to let them facilitate the Bible Discussion for multiple weeks, as this is essential to master before launching a Connect group.

As they grow in competence, contact one of the elders so they can meet with the Connect Elder to prepare to launch a Connect group from your Connect Group.

The most important aspect of successfully birthing a new Connect group is creating a core team of people to birth the new Connect group. Before birthing, every new leader should have three to four other adults ready to commit to at least six months with the new group.

Once the leader has met with the Connect Elder, they will present the new Connect group and leader to the church. Then, have a party to celebrate what God is doing, and pray for the new group! (No parties are required, but why wouldn't you want one?)

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## *How to Step Down from Leading Your Connect Group*

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First, do not simply email the Connect group saying you quit. Yes, this is what most people will want to do. No, it is not a good strategy.

One of the most damaging things that can happen to Connect group members is to get an email out of the blue (or an announcement at the end of a gathering) saying that the group is disbanded and the leader is too stressed or just moving one. When group members experience an event like this, it makes it very hard for them to ever participate in a Connect group again.

It is normal and (often) a very good thing for a Connect group leader to take a break, or completely step down, from leading. As life changes, sometimes rest or adjustments are necessary. Prepare your group by doing the following things:

- Raise up Connect group members to take on roles to prevent burnout and easily transition leadership when stepping down.
- Be transparent with your group, ask them to pray for you.
- Tell the elders you are considering stepping down from leading. We suggest taking a three-month

hiatus from all leadership responsibilities before completely committing to stop.

- Help the elders transition the leadership of your group or, if necessary, find another group for the members of your group.
- Get into another Connect group (or stay in that one). You need to be in a Connect group *more* after leading, not less.

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## *What Should I Do with My Kids During Connect Group?*

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FBC Afton wants to equip parents to be the primary disciple-makers in the home. So, how do kids fit in a Connect group?

Well, depends on the group. We trust our Connect Group Leaders and give them the freedom to determine what works best for their group. Some groups can provide on-site childcare. If the Connect group host has an area that is suitable for children, it is a great option to have the kids nearby while the adults meet. Members of the group could take turns watching the children; however, this could disrupt the regular engagement of the adults. But we understand this may be a necessity that works best for some groups.