

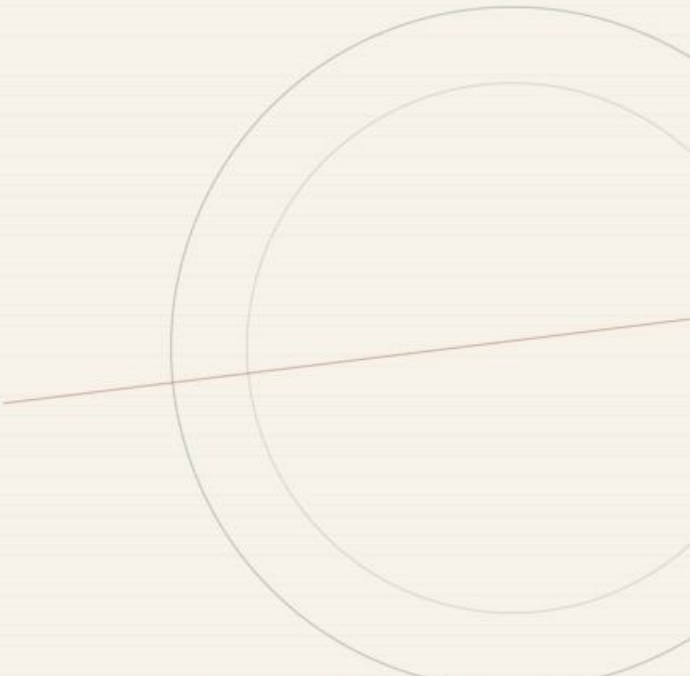
THE OPEN TABLE

Life Group Leader Handbook

Helping people belong and become.

2026 EDITION

From Guests to Disciples



Set another place.

THE OPEN TABLE / LUKE 5:27-32

Helping people belong and become.

Jesus called Levi (also known by his first name, Matthew) away from his tax booth and into a new life of following him. Matthew's first recorded response was to open his home and set a table. Around it sat Jesus, his disciples, tax collectors, and others who knew they needed mercy. Life Groups seek to become that kind of place: open homes where people are welcomed by grace, known through relationship, formed by Scripture, and called to follow Jesus together. The life of a disciple is made by living in communion and unity with Christ, other disciples, and those whom he would call to be his disciples. And we as leaders continue to set out empty chairs because the table is not full.

- 01 Jesus welcomes us by grace.
- 02 Jesus calls us to follow and forms us through truth and relationship.
- 03 Jesus gives every disciple a part in serving others.
- 04 Jesus sends us to make room for more people.

From Guests to Disciples

WELCOME, LEADER

A field guide for faithful presence.

This handbook is designed to be a Life Group leader's best friend. Mark it up, return to it, and use it as a guide to help you shepherd your Life Group well.

USE IT BEFORE THE GATHERING

Pray over the names and requests. Go through your checklist. Remind yourself of the focus.

USE IT AFTER THE GATHERING

Notice who needs care. Put it in the prayer journal. Debrief with your other leaders and apprentice. Ask for support early.

“The call is not to be impressive. The call is to abide and be faithful.”

QUICK NAVIGATION

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OUR SHARED AIM

Helping people belong and become.

Healthy Life Groups are Christ-centered communities where people are known, loved, served, and celebrated.

Understanding Life Groups

The convictions that shape how we gather, care, grow, and make disciples.

FROM GUESTS TO DISCIPLES

Jesus welcomes people by grace, forms them through truth and relationship, gives each disciple a part, and sends us to make room for more.

OUR MATURITY GOAL: COLOSSIANS 1:28-29

01 / COMMUNITY

Move from sharing a room to sharing life.

Jesus is the true host. He welcomes people by grace and forms them into a community that knows, loves, serves, and celebrates one another.

01 **Knowing & being known**
Honest presence, attentive listening, and relationships beyond the surface.

02 **Loving & being loved**
Christ-shaped affection, patience, encouragement, truth, and care.

03 **Serving & being served**
We notice needs, share burdens, and allow others to care for us too.

04 **Celebrating & being celebrated**
We mark God's grace, answered prayer, milestones, and ordinary joys.

A Life Group is not merely a meeting to attend; it is a place to be known, formed, and equipped to serve.

Four convictions held together.

The table is shaped by Scripture, deepened through relationship, strengthened by shared life, and opened for more people.

01 / AUTHORITY

Bible-based community

Scripture gives the group its authority and moves us toward faithful obedience.

02 / FORMATION

Relational discipleship

People grow through truth practiced in honest, grace-filled relationships.

03 / SHARED LIFE

Intentional community

We serve and celebrate together; community is cultivated, not assumed.

04 / SENDING

A mindset for multiplication

We develop leaders and create room so others can experience this kind of community.

Spiritual growth precedes numerical growth. A lightly attended night may be the very circumstance that lets a group go deeper relationally.

A repeatable gathering that makes room for people and God.

01 Fellowship Share life beyond the formal meeting. **30-45 MIN**

02 Discussion Time Scripture-based conversation and life application. **30-35 MIN**

03 Prayer Requests Name clear, personal needs without beginning an advice session. **5-10 MIN**

04 Prayer Time Actually pray; smaller circles can help everyone participate. **30-40 MIN**

Treat the rhythm as a healthy guide, not a rigid stopwatch. Protect Scripture, prayer, participation, care, and relationships.

What our philosophy should produce.

01 / SCRIPTURE

Word-shaped

The Bible is opened, understood, and applied - not merely referenced.

02 / DEPENDENCE

Prayerful

Needs move into God's hands, and people follow up during the week.

03 / CONNECTION

Relational

Members know one another's stories, burdens, gifts, and next steps.

04 / PARTICIPATION

Shared

Everyone has something to receive and something meaningful to give.

05 / WELCOME

Outward-facing

The group welcomes guests, serves others, and keeps open chairs.

06 / REPRODUCTION

Multiplying

Apprentices are developed and healthy community is reproduced.

SET ANOTHER PLACE

An empty chair is a prayer that someone else will find a place in a Christ-centered community.

PLAN BEFORE URGENCY

Involve the Director of Discipleship early as the group approaches fourteen adults.



Fed by Jesus. Restored by grace. Sent to care.

Leading Well

Leaders serve from fellowship with Christ, not from pressure to perform. Jesus nourishes his people, restores the weary, and entrusts them with care. The leader does not serve the whole table alone; healthy groups learn to share the work.

REQUIRED BEFORE SERVING

Every Life Group leader must complete the Life Group Leader Onboarding event before beginning service.

01 / POSTURE

Lead as a disciple before leading as a facilitator.

01 / ABIDE

Walk with Christ

Pursue Scripture, prayer, worship, repentance, and faithful participation in Grace Life.

02 / ATTEND

Love people

Know names and stories, notice absence, protect trust, and follow up when needs are shared.

03 / DEPEND

Depend on the Spirit

Prepare diligently while remembering that growth comes from God, not pressure or performance.

Prepare the gathering. Prepare your heart. Pray the names.

LEAD PEOPLE

Know who is present, absent, new, hurting, and ready for a next step.

ASK FOR HELP EARLY

You are not expected to carry every care need or ministry problem alone.

LEADER'S PRAYER

Where do I need to abide, attend, or depend more fully this week?

What faithful preparation looks like.

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------|--|
| 01 | Prepare the gathering | Study the material, clarify the aim, coordinate the host, and plan a simple path. |
| 02 | Facilitate participation | Ask clear questions, create room for multiple voices, and move toward obedience. |
| 03 | Practice real prayer | The depth of the prayer requests shared directly correlates with the depth of your relationships with the people. Dig for real needs, pray, and follow up. |
| 04 | Communicate every week | Use the group's WhatsApp channel consistently; clarity is pastoral care. |
| 05 | Care and connect | Help guests land, notice absences, and serve as a Sunday connector. |
| 06 | Develop and multiply | Share responsibility, coach an apprentice, and pray for two open chairs. |

The leader does not serve the whole table alone. Healthy groups make ownership visible and help others grow through meaningful ministry.

THIS WEEK'S PLAN

Scripture to prepare · people to notice · responsibility to share

One group, several lanes of ownership.

GUIDANCE

Leader

Guides Scripture, prayer, care, next steps, and multiplication.

DEVELOPMENT

Apprentice

Shares real ministry, receives feedback, and prepares to help multiply.

WELCOME

Outreach & Care

Welcomes guests, notices needs, and mobilizes practical care.

CLARITY

Communication

Sends clear weekly messages and helps the group stay connected.

CURRENT-POLICY REFERENCE

See the policy appendix for childcare, reimbursements, home safety, abuse disclosures, and mandatory reporting. Grace Life's current approved policies and pastoral direction govern.

Facilitating Prayer & Discussion

Make room for people to encounter Scripture, speak honestly about life, pray together, and respond to God.

Guide the room without becoming the destination.

Head. Heart. Hands.

A pathway from understanding the truth to living it.



01 • LEARN

Head

What does the text say?

Questions that build knowledge and understanding—what happened, what it means, and what is true.

“What does this passage teach us about God?”

WHO? WHAT? WHEN? HOW?

02 • UNCOVER

Heart

What is this truth revealing in us?

Questions that uncover feelings, wounds, desires, fears, and resistance—the condition of the soil receiving the Word.

“How does that truth make you feel—and why?”

FEEL • DESIRE • FEAR • RESIST

03 • RESPOND

Hands

How will we put it into practice?

Questions that turn conviction into a concrete next step—something we can write down, act on, and follow up.

“What will you do this week, and when will you do it?”

**SPECIFIC • MEASURABLE • ACHIEVABLE
REALISTIC • TIME-BOUND**

The heart is the hinge.

Truth understood rarely becomes truth practiced until it moves through the heart. Do not skip it—and do not stop there.

Six practices for guiding the room.

Create a clear path for participation without becoming the center of every conversation.

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- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|--|
| 01 | Ask one clear question | Do not stack several questions and make the group guess which to answer. |
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- | | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|---|
| 02 | Wait without rescuing | Count slowly to ten. Silence is not an emergency. |
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- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|---|
| 03 | Invite without shaming | Open the circle to quieter voices without putting anyone on the spot. |
|-----------|-------------------------------|---|
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- | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|
| 04 | Return to the text | Ask, "What makes you say that?" and "Where do you see that?" |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|
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- | | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|
| 05 | Connect contributions | Help people hear how one insight relates to another. |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|
-
- | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|
| 06 | Summarize and move | Name the thread, connect it to the focus, and ask the next question. |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|
-

Guide the room without becoming the destination. Scripture sets the direction, and every voice can contribute.

Name it. Pray it. Follow up.

01

Name it

Ask for one clear request and why it matters.

02

Pray it

→ Begin while the need is fresh. Invite short prayers.

03

Follow up

→ Assign a check-in and celebrate God's answer.

"We're going to keep requests brief so we can spend more time praying than talking about prayer."

COACH THE MOMENT

The dominating voice

Thank them, invite in another voice, and follow up privately.

The silent room

Simplify, use a hands-level question to generate specific requests, or let pairs talk for sixty seconds.

The rabbit trail

Honor it, park it, and return to the aim.

The vulnerable disclosure

Slow down, stop the advice rush, clarify support, and follow up appropriately.

PEOPLE OR REQUESTS TO FOLLOW UP

Discipling & Multiplying

Develop people who can carry ministry forward without treating multiplication like a sudden split.

Receive grace. Entrust truth. Develop faithful people. Release them to serve others.

2 Timothy 2:1-2

01 / APPRENTICE PATHWAY

Development happens through shared ministry.

SIX DEVELOPMENT STEPS

01

Pray

Ask God to identify and form a person.

02

Invite

Name what you see and offer a clear next step.

03

Involve

Give real, bounded responsibility.

04

Debrief

Give one encouragement and one growth step.

05

Entrust

Increase responsibility over time.

06

Release

Affirm, send, and keep coaching.

CHARACTERISTICS TO LOOK FOR

FAITHFUL

Follows through and keeps confidences.

AVAILABLE

Can make room for responsibility.

TEACHABLE

Receives and applies feedback.

RELATIONAL

Notifies and cares for people.

THE APPRENTICE I AM PRAYING FOR

What do I see in them? What responsibility could I share next?

One person. One responsibility. One honest debrief.

DAYS 1–30	Identify & invite Pray through the group. Consult the pastor. Invite one person and entrust a visible, low-risk responsibility.
DAYS 31–60	Involve & debrief Let the apprentice lead prayer or part of the discussion. Debrief within forty-eight hours.
DAYS 61–90	Entrust & evaluate Let the apprentice lead a full gathering with support. Review readiness with the pastor.

A PERSON I WILL DEVELOP	ONE RESPONSIBILITY

Assessing apprentice readiness: 1) meaningful shared ministry, 2) early pastoral involvement, 3) capable leadership and hosting, 4) clear communication, and 5) foundational relationships in the sending.

Hosting & Creating Community

Open homes. Open chairs. Open lives. Hospitality clears the way for people to be welcomed, known, and invited into shared life.

Open homes and open chairs make room in the home.
Hospitality and culture make room in the heart.

01 / HOSTING

Manage the doorway, not just the lesson.

BEFORE PEOPLE ARRIVE

01 / CHAIRS

Make room visibly

Set out slightly fewer chairs than you expect. The goal is to be seen putting out chairs for people as they arrive.

02 / WELCOME

Share the doorway

Have food ready to go. Ask early arrivals to watch the door.

03 / FOOD

Plan for food

Share this responsibility with others in the Life Group.

THE FIRST TEN MINUTES

Help people find a place to land.

People decide whether they can return through eye contact, welcome, and whether anyone helps them enter the room.

THERMOSTAT, NOT THERMOMETER

Set the room's temperature.

Your energy shapes the welcome and multiplies with the crowd.

10

Within ten feet, make eye contact.

5

Within five feet, speak.

An open chair quietly communicates: there is room for someone else.

MY WELCOME PLAN

Who will watch the door? Who needs an accessible seat? Who might be arriving for the first time?

Cultivate the conditions. Do not force the growth.

01 / CLARITY

Name the norms

Say confidentiality, participation, and honesty out loud. Unspoken norms default to the loudest voice.

02 / CONTRIBUTION

Give everyone a job

Belonging grows through contribution, not consumption.

03 / ATTENTION

Track the drift

A sincere “missed you” message often matters more than a polished lesson.

04 / SENDING

Multiply, don’t hoard

Raise an apprentice and send people. A living garden seeds new gardens.

This fall: Give someone a job. Name one norm out loud. Contact the person who drifted.

Acts 2:42–47 describes a shared life of teaching, fellowship, bread, prayer, generosity, and daily presence—not merely a weekly program.

Ready to begin?

☐	Leader, apprentice, host, care contact, and communicator are named.
☐	The roster is current; every person knows when and where the group begins.
☐	The WhatsApp or established communication channel is ready.
☐	The Scripture or ministry resource for the first gathering is selected.
☐	Children, food, seating, accessibility, and welcome details are clear.
☐	Two people or households are named for the open chairs.
☐	An intentional social event is scheduled for this semester.
☐	An outreach or service event is scheduled.
☐	Any unresolved question has been brought to the pastor overseeing Life Groups.

OUR RHYTHM

Pray the names. Lead the gathering. Share the work.
Communicate clearly. Notice absences.

OUR CONFIDENCE

Leaders cultivate faithful rhythms; Christ produces lasting fruit.

Plan the year before urgency sets the calendar.

Create a shared opportunity to serve others

Prepare your heart.

Where do I need to abide, attend, or depend more fully this week?

ABIDE

How am I walking with Christ?

ATTEND

Who needs my love and
attention?

DEPEND

Where do I need the Spirit's help?

TOOLS FOR THE YEAR / THIS WEEK'S PLAN

Prepare faithfully.

Clarify the focus, notice the people, and share the work.

SCRIPTURE TO PREPARE

PEOPLE TO NOTICE OR CONTACT

RESPONSIBILITY TO SHARE

PRAYER BEFORE THE GATHERING

Questions I Will Ask

Prepare a clear path from understanding to honest response.

HEAD

What does the text actually say?

HEART

What does this reveal about my heart, and how does it make me feel?

HANDS

What faithful response should happen this week?

01

02

03

04

The Apprentice I Am Praying For

Development begins with prayer, attention, invitation, and real shared ministry.

NAME

DATE I WILL INVITE THEM

WHAT I SEE IN THEM

A RESPONSIBILITY I CAN SHARE NEXT

ENCOURAGEMENT AND GROWTH STEP

Childcare, Reimbursements & Home Safety

Grace Life's current approved policies and pastoral direction govern. Confirm questions or unusual circumstances with the pastor overseeing Life Groups before acting.

CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITY

- The Life Group leader is responsible for establishing a clear childcare plan.
- Teen girls from Grace Life are the preferred childcare helpers. Ask the deacon of nursery for help identifying caregivers when needed.
- Teen boys may not serve as childcare workers. If adult men assist, an adult woman must also be present.

REIMBURSEMENT

- Childcare reimbursement is limited to a maximum of \$25 per gathering or \$100 per month.
- Submit a picture of the check or transaction each month through Grace Life's online reimbursement process.
- The supervising pastor approves requests and the treasurer issues reimbursement. Do not use cash when reimbursement will be requested.

HOME SAFETY

- Provide a clean, functional, child-safe gathering environment.
- Secure pets and address hazards before people arrive.
- Communicate accessibility concerns early so the group can make a thoughtful plan.

Abuse Disclosures & Mandatory Reporting

A disclosure is an act of vulnerability and trust. Respond calmly, protect the person’s dignity, and involve pastoral leadership promptly.

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 01 | Listen and care. | Receive the disclosure without shock, blame, interrogation, or an advice rush. |
| 02 | Be honest about confidentiality. | Do not promise secrecy. Explain that safety concerns may require a report or additional help. |
| 03 | Do not investigate. | Document what was shared, preserve the person’s own words when possible, and do not confront the alleged offender. |
| 04 | Report when required. | Grace Life policy reflects Texas reporting requirements when abuse or neglect of a child, an adult age 65 or older, or an adult with a disability is reasonably suspected. |
| 05 | Continue appropriate care. | For an adult victim, respect their agency regarding legal action while involving pastoral leadership and helping them access support. |

**Texas Abuse
Hotline**

1-800-252-5400

Online information: dfps.texas.gov/contact_us/report_abuse.asp

When there is immediate danger, contact emergency services. For any uncertainty, contact the pastor overseeing Life Groups immediately. Current approved policy and pastoral direction govern.

TOOLS FOR THE YEAR

Life Group Roster

Write the names. Pray the names. Notice who is missing.

LEADER

MEETING DAY / TIME

LOCATION

#	NAME	PHONE / EMAIL	HOUSEHOLD / NOTES
01			
02			
03			
04			
05			
06			
07			
08			
09			
10			
11			
12			
13			

Know the people in your care.

A roster is more than a list. It helps us remember, reach out, and make room.

#	NAME	PHONE / EMAIL	HOUSEHOLD / NOTES
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			
19			
20			
21			
22			
23			
24			
25			

PEOPLE TO CONTACT OR
FOLLOW UP WITH

Carry one another's burdens.

GATHERING DATE

PEOPLE PRESENT

Keep sensitive details appropriately confidential. Write only what helps you pray and care faithfully.

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

Name it. Pray it. Follow up.

GATHERING DATE

PEOPLE PRESENT

Dig for real needs, pray, and follow up. Record only the details needed for faithful prayer and care.

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

Remember the grace.

GATHERING DATE

PEOPLE PRESENT

Celebrate God's faithfulness. Note answers, changes, next steps, and people who need continued care.

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

NAME & REQUEST

FOLLOW-UP DATE / ANSWER

ANSWERED PRAYER & SIGNS OF GRACE

Capture what will help you guide people from understanding to honest response.

Record only what helps you pray, care faithfully, and take the next appropriate step.

Use this space for coaching notes, apprentice development, and plans for the coming ministry year.

Faithful discipleship can be as simple as opening up your home.

Jesus called Matthew to follow him, and the very first thing that he did was bring his friends into his home to meet him.

Be like Matthew.

Open your home. Share your life. Set out an empty chair.

LUKE 5:27-32