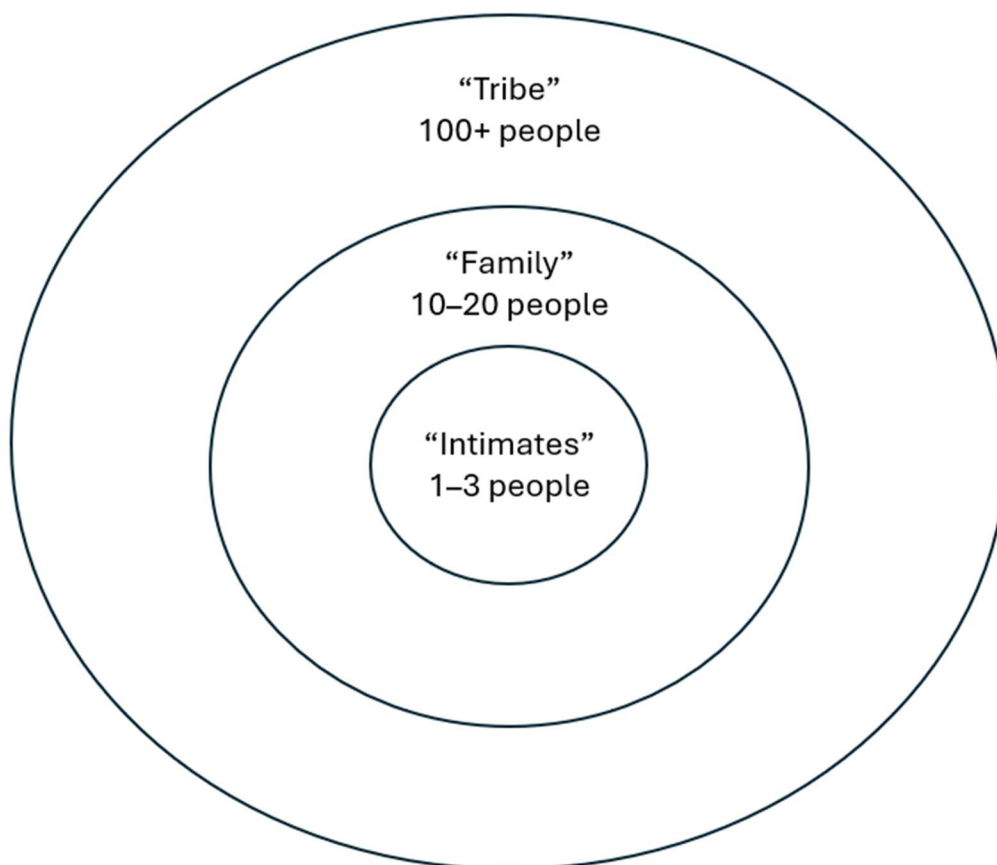




22nd Street Baptist Church
Covenant Groups

Introduction

God calls us, as disciples of Jesus, to live together in community. Following the model produced by the “Practicing the Way” ministry, we can visualize community according to three levels of relationship, as seen below:



To best practice Community, which is a Foundational Spiritual Practice, we should have relationships representative of each level of relationship. In the life of our church, we address the need for relationships at each level in the following way:

- **Tribe:** vision and mission, Leadership Team, membership, family meetings, church covenant, Sunday morning worship, Wednesday night discipleship
- **Family:** Connect Group ministry
- **Intimates:** Covenant Groups

As you can see, what we call “Covenant Groups” inhabit the narrowest level of relationship in the life of our church, what “Practicing the Way” calls our “intimates.” These are the brothers and sisters in Christ who know us best, with whom we can share *anything*. These are the people who will hear about what we need and love us, no matter what. These are

the people whose love for us will include holding us accountable to living for Christ with all of who we are, including in the areas we would tell no one else about.

Why is it important to cultivate relationships with a few “intimates?” What is a covenant group, and how should we think about doing this kind of ministry well? In this document, we will answer both questions. **The goal will be to demonstrate that every disciple of Jesus should have relationships like these established in his or her life and to equip you to pursue, begin, and cultivate these relationships well.** We are convinced that, often, the most radical transformation in our walks with Christ happens in this context. Therefore, we want you to experience this ministry, too.

Why “Intimates?”

The goal of cultivating relationships at the level of “intimates” is to be fully known and fully loved by a brother or sister in Christ. You might read this and think, “Why do I need this? I know already that I am fully known and fully loved by God.” This is true; God already knows and loves us perfectly. Yet, he also calls us into the fullness of life in community with other disciples of Jesus. Even though his love is sufficient for all we need, there is evidently still a need for the love of others in the church. Otherwise, why would he call us into this kind of life? Why not have us be in solitude all the time, loving him and being loved by him?

One answer is that to be a disciple of Jesus – to be like Jesus in your character – is to be a person of love. Consider the God revealed to us in Scripture. He is revealed to us as a triune God, meaning that he is one Being but three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches that the Persons have loved one another from eternity. The Bible likewise teaches that “God is love,” or that God is the very definition and source of love (1 John 4:8). Therefore, within the nature and being of God is relationship, meaning that relationship is at the center of all reality. Isolation is not just damaging to the soul; it is opposed to the being of God, our Creator. It is no surprise, then, that when Jesus models what it means to be human, he does so in community, with his disciples. He loves them, and they love him. Loving one another, in the context of the church, models Christlikeness in the world.

This leads to the second point: that to be truly loved, you must be truly known. Because we live in a fallen world, within each of us there are parts of ourselves we’d rather keep hidden. This desire to remain hidden is called *shame*. Shame is what led Adam and Eve to clothe themselves and hide from God after eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, rather than running to God and confessing their sin. **When we are trapped in shame, we cannot deal with our sin in the way God would have us deal**

with it. The problem here is not just intellectual. Many of us *know* that God loves us and wants us to confess everything to him (he knows it already!), but shame is a powerful emotion that keeps us trapped in the same sinful habits, powerless to stop them. So many disciples of Jesus, who love Jesus and want to live for him, go years silently struggling through some besetting sin, quietly losing hope in making any progress, without telling anyone about it. **As they lose hope in overcoming the sin, the sweetness of the gospel begins to diminish.** As it diminishes, the disciple of Jesus no longer seeks closeness and intimacy with God in the way that would bring life to him or her. James is clear, in James 1:14–15, about the effects of sin left unchecked in our lives (CSB):

“14 But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. 15 Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.”

So many of us are stuck in the cycle of besetting desire, which brings forth sin in our lives. The result over time: a “deadness” to our faith that drowns out the desire for God and leaves us feeling powerless and ashamed. This is not what God would have for us.

Have you ever thought to yourself, “If someone knew about *that*, there is no way they would love me”? If so, then you have experienced a common doubt about our relationships brought about by shame. When you are not truly known, it is impossible to know whether anyone truly loves you. True love would desire your best and union with you, no matter what. But without “intimates,” you’ve never experienced the “no matter what” of that statement. You are still hiding when God calls you into the light to be healed and freed.

This leads, finally, to the third point: by cultivating these relationships, we are used by God to minister the gospel to one another in a way that we cannot effectively minister at the other levels of relationship in the church. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you became a disciple because you believed the gospel and trusted in Jesus for your salvation. However, you never outgrow the gospel. You simply build on it as your foundation. In community, we continue to minister the gospel to one another, reminding each other of these great truths in all stages of life.

Think about the “that” you thought of earlier: the one thing you’d be afraid to tell a brother or sister in Christ. Imagine telling a trusted brother or sister (it should be someone of the same sex) about that struggle or sin. Imagine what it would feel like if that person responded with compassion, encouragement about the gospel, and love, rather than the rejection you expected to hear. **When we experience this, the gospel is ministered to us; when we offer it to others, we minister the gospel to them.** We become, in that moment, a representative of Jesus and share his love with another person in loving them. This is

indispensable in the life of a disciple of Jesus. In fact, we could go further: **deeper freedom in Christ is impossible in this life apart from this kind of ministry.** If we refuse to come into the light with the things that leave us feeling ashamed, we will always be doubtful at some level about whether we are truly loved. The concept we're developing here is expressed beautifully in James 5:16 (CSB):

“16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect.”

Notice what this verse does not say: it does not say that we will be *forgiven* after confessing our sin to one another. We receive forgiveness from God alone; only he has that authority. Rather, it says that we will be *healed*. **Healing, or spiritual wholeness, comes from confession to one another.** God has designed life together in such a way that when we reveal our depths to a trusted brother or sister in Christ, he uses that experience to bring healing to our lives. Healing from sin of every kind. Healing of our brokenness.

So, let's seek to cultivate these relationships! In the next section, we'll discuss what a Covenant Group is and how to pursue and cultivate a group well.

What is a Covenant Group?

In the Bible, the word “covenant” denotes a formal agreement between persons that establishes the parameters of a relationship. **Covenants provide clear expectations, boundaries, and stability to a relationship, but the relationship is key.** The terms of the covenant protect its integrity and longevity.

There are many covenants in the Bible. Some of these are specific covenants made between God and particular human beings or groups of people. For example, the Sinai covenant established the Mosaic law as binding upon the Israelites and the conditions under which Israel would experience either blessings or curses against the nation and land. Other covenants in the Bible are established by God but exist between human persons. The key example here is marriage, which is a covenant made before God between a husband and wife. The basics of a covenant, however, are the same across the board.

Relationships at the level of “intimates” requires a deeper trust and intimacy than exists between you and every other disciple of Jesus. In most cases, your “intimates” are the people you love and trust the most and who know you best, aside from a spouse or close family members. Therefore, if that trust is violated, the consequences can be disastrous and painful. For this reason, we think it best to protect these relationships with the establishment of covenant agreements. This is why we call these “Covenant Groups.”

In the Covenant Group Ministry, the key is the *relationship* and the *agreements* that protect it. Many ministries of this kind focus on running a certain curriculum or producing certain results. This is not the primary focus of the Covenant Group Ministry. As you will see below, we provide guidance on curriculum and results, but the key is that you and the other person know that this relationship is a place where you can be truly known and truly loved. The Covenant Group Ministry is a place for spiritual friendships that, we hope, last a lifetime and produce deep transformation and advancement in God's Kingdom.

Virtually every covenant relationship includes both *positive agreements* and *negative agreements*. The positive agreements say, "I will do _____." The negative agreements say, "I will not do _____." Below, you will find a list of positive and negative agreements important for cultivating covenant group relationships.

But first, how do we find these relationships? There is no cookie-cutter answer to this question. However, here are a few thoughts we have about finding these relationships:

- Begin praying for a Covenant Group relationship with a brother or sister in Christ in your church. Pray that God will lead you to that person and that person to you.
- Consider what you need from the relationship. Do you need someone to mentor you? Do you need someone to walk alongside as you pray for and encourage one another? Look for relationships that could address that need.
- Be actively involved at the other two levels of community. Be an active member. Don't miss a Sunday if you can help it. Join and be an active contributor to a Connect Group. Serve in a ministry. Covenant Group relationships often emerge in these contexts.
- Consider who it is you have *chemistry* with. Covenant Group relationships are best thought of as "spiritual friendships." Friendships involve relational chemistry. Who do you connect with really well in the church?

Covenant Group relationships will often develop organically, as a result of prayer and concerted effort. You can also reach out to a pastor, mentor, or Connect Group leader about beginning this relationship.

Second, what is the structure of a Covenant Group relationship? We believe that Covenant Groups come in two kinds and that the structure differs depending on the kind. Here they are:

<i>Vertical</i> 	<i>Horizontal</i> 
One disciple <i>leading</i> another disciple in his/her growth in Christ • Less mutual, one disciple depends on the other, but not <i>vice versa</i> • More responsibility on the one leading the group to consider curriculum, teach, etc. • Usually ends once the younger disciple grows to maturity or the specific issue is addressed	Two disciples <i>mutually aiding</i> one another in their growth in Christ • Mutual, both disciples depend on each other for growth, confess sin, pray for one another, etc. • Mutual responsibility, both disciples decide on curriculum & mutually discuss material • Usually lasts as long as the life stage lasts

Ideally, every disciple of Jesus should have *both* at least one vertical relationship and one horizontal relationship. There are, however, times when it is best, given one's life stage, to especially seek out one or the other. When seeking a Covenant Group relationship, you should consider whether the relationship you are seeking is vertical or horizontal. This will depend on the needs you are seeking to meet in the relationship.

Another note on structure: though we call it a "group," Covenant Groups are typically best done as one-on-one relationships. However, a small group Covenant Group can be formed. Usually, it is best for a group like this to have no more than five people in it.

Third, what do you do in Covenant Groups? In a Covenant Group, you want to do three things:

- Accountability
- Vulnerability
- Prayer

First, you hold each other accountable. This means confessing sin to one another and establishing concrete steps for avoiding and overcoming that sin. It means reading books that help you to better understand how to deal with that sin. Second, you practice vulnerability. This means getting real about what's really going on in your life, especially in those areas you'd like not to tell anyone else about. You receive and offer love in that context, dealing with real issues together. Third, you pray. You approach God together, one

each other's behalf, and hear one another pray for one another. This is deeply intimate and shows the other person that you love him or her. Because of the intimacy of this setting, **never establish a Covenant Group with a member of the opposite sex.** These are things you may practice with your spouse if you are married, but it is unwise to have this relationship established with any member of the opposite sex with whom you are not married, even if you are dating or engaged to that person. Relational intimacy at this level, in most cases, leads naturally to romantic feelings that can lead to sin.

Notice that none of these things have to do with curriculum. Good curriculum is important but secondary in Covenant Groups. Remember, the relationship is central. However, our "Discipleship Resources Page" at 22church.com includes resources that can be a helpful starting point for researching curriculum, whether you want to begin with a general resource on spiritual formation (i.e., "Practicing the Way") or resources for addressing specific issues or struggles. For further guidance, you can contact a pastor or Connect Group leader.

Fourth, what are the covenant agreements that we should establish? Your first meeting does what we call "setting the stage": it establishes the covenantal agreements for the relationship, so that everyone is on the same page. This is a meeting to bathe in prayer before, during, and after the meeting. Below are some positive and negative covenant agreements you may establish:

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
• I will speak the truth to you in love. • I will tell the truth about myself. If there is sin, I will bring it out into the light. • If you need accountability, I will be faithful in providing it and checking in. • I will always point us back to Jesus and the gospel. • I will pray for you every day.	• I will not gossip or complain about you to anyone else. • I will not let what we talk about in this group leave this group (caveat: unless a legal matter must be addressed). • I will not hide. • I will not condemn or reject you because of anything that you tell me.

The lists above are best for a horizontal Covenant Group. In vertical Covenant Groups, things look a bit different. For example, since in a vertical relationship only one person is confessing sin, it is important (a) that the person confessing promise to tell the truth and be vulnerable and (b) that the leader promise to receive a confession with God's love, not

rejection, and hold the other person accountable. Consider which covenant agreements are best for your Covenant Group.

The covenant agreements should be repeated and reviewed often, as well as prayed over regularly. This will ensure that everyone in the group remains on the same page about what must be true for the stability and longevity, as well as health, of the relationship to be maintained and protected. If someone violates a covenant agreement, this should be addressed immediately. Grievances and sin swept under the rug lead to resentment and disrupt the intimacy needed for these relationships to flourish.

Conclusion

This has been a short introduction to the Covenant Group Ministry of 22nd Street Baptist Church. There is more to say, but our prayer is that you know why these relationships are important and how our Covenant Group Ministry is designed to help you establish, cultivate, and benefit from these relationships. Our experience has been that the most profound transformation we've experienced in our walks with Christ took place in the context of these relationships. Nonetheless, they are a neglected part of our discipleship in Christ today. Our prayer is that this guide will aid more people in the congregation to benefit from this ministry, overcome sin, know Christ more intimately, and be more effective for the Kingdom of God.

If you desire to have these kinds of relationships in your life and lack them today, you can end this time with the prayer below:

Father, I know that you would have me develop deeper, more intimate relationships with other siblings in Christ. I desire these relationships. By your grace, help me to find the person with whom you would have me cultivate a Covenant Group relationship. Lead me in establishing that relationship and being faithful to it, so that I may grow in Christ. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.