



STRATEGIC LIFE GROUPS DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING

THE VINE
STUDENT MINISTRIES

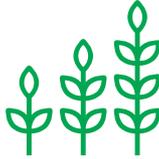
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION



CONNECT

Stage 1: Contact
Stage 2: Gather



GROW

Stage 3: Bible Reading
Stage 4: Prayer



IMPACT

Stage 5: Encouraging
Stage 6: Influencing

INTRODUCTION

Life Group Leaders have great influence in students' spiritual growth.

Regardless of how often we feel we are spinning our wheels in student ministry, students are noticing and responding to our efforts. Nine out of ten students say they've grown spiritually in the last year, with 65% of students saying they've grown specifically in their relationship with God. Almost two out of three students attribute that growth to their small group leaders or churches. More specifically, students have shown that they confide in their small group leaders (33%) on matters of faith more than their friends (28%), parents (23%), or youth pastors (11%). With this in mind, our efforts to invest in life groups are critical to best help students thrive and grow through middle and high school.

For more on these statistics, check out this report! <http://tiny.cc/TrendReport>

Everything has changed... almost.

The whole world is different right now, and while student ministry today feels different, it is still foundationally intact. In fact, if anything has changed, it is the artifice of what we thought was important because we had always done things a certain way. This is an unprecedented time, so there is no room to hold onto a certain way of doing things.

In this season of ministry, it is critically important to be consistent in whatever you commit to doing. When everything else has been disrupted in the lives of our students and their families, consistency is a gift we can give them.

The feelings of uncertainty for many and worries for others need to be met with a well-executed plan of action. Our foundations are still intact, but the methods we have to accomplish our work have dramatically changed, and our students' environments, time, and influences have changed.

During this time, we must be student ministry leaders who will continue to:

- Help students feel that they are cared about.
- Help students believe that they belong to something.
- Help students be comfortable asking questions.

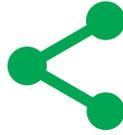
In the efforts to figure out how to stay connected in a socially distanced world, we can feel a little overwhelmed with what we don't know--so much so that we begin to forget what we do know. Do not forget! The work of reaching students well through life groups has not changed, and the foundations of discipleship in student ministry remain the same. Finding ways to focus our energy and time will help us to not only successfully lead and shepherd students during this season, but also create the foundations for a healthy student ministry long-term.

Adapted from
"Strategic Re-Innovation for Student Ministry"
by LifeWay Students

This handbook will walk you through a focused process for successfully moving students toward spiritual maturity in the midst of social distancing.

It is our prayer and expectation that through faithful and consistent pursuit of this process we will breathe renewed life and focus into our life groups that will lead to growth in student engagement and spiritual maturity.

This is a moment to establish movement!



CONNECT

STAGE 1: CONTACT

At this stage, we want students to feel like they're cared about and be given an opportunity to connect with their peers in a life group on a regular basis.

"Contact" involves reaching out to students who are on each life group's target list individually and inviting them to be a part of their group's active communication channel, as well as their life group's weekly gathering (more on this below).

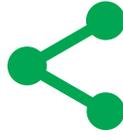
TARGET LISTS

Our target lists are students that we see as prospects for our life groups. More specifically, these are students from each life group's audience (age & gender) who are (1) currently connected to our life groups, or (2) have expressed interest in our life groups in the past six months by engaging four or more times.

If we aren't reaching out to these students, then odds are, no one is. We need to be committed to giving them an opportunity to connect with their peers and begin moving toward spiritual maturity. You might be surprised! The shifts and changes in our culture have led many disconnected students to sense the need for connection, and we have the ability to meet that need.

ACTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Our active communication channels are the means by which life groups are staying in communication with each other. This could be GroupMe, group texting, Instagram & Facebook Groups, etc. The point is that each life group needs a workable space for regular (daily, even!) communication.



CONNECT

Your active communication channel is one of two main entry points for new students. As you reach out to those on your target list, get them connected here! We want to make sure to establish consistent, continued communication with every student as quickly as possible.

IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR CONTACT

Where can I get my target list?

You can get your target lists from our Girl's Ministry Director & Student Ministry Admin, Madison Wolfe by emailing mwolfe@hhbc.net.

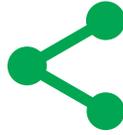
How am I supposed to contact my target list?

Get creative! Odds are, a phone call will be best. But, there are many students who we can engage with through other communication avenues, or even by reaching out to their parents. Write a card, get on Xbox live, etc. The main goal is to have individual (not just mass) communication with students to show them that you care.

What do I say when I contact a student on my target list?

Be flexible and move with the conversation. But as a baseline, here are a few things you might consider:

- Ask how they've been doing during the social distancing era (get specific--if a student gives you an answer, follow up on it instead of moving on).
- Tell them about your communication channel and weekly gathering with their peers (invite them, and share specific students names who want to connect with them--and if they're interested, get them connected right there, on the phone).
- Offer to pray for them (even if they don't have any prayer requests, you can make them feel cared about through intentional prayer).



CONNECT

STAGE 2: GATHER

At this stage, we want students to feel like they belong to something and be given an opportunity to build relationships with their peers in a life group.

"Gather" involves a weekly gathering (preferably in-person) of each life group where students can connect with each other in a memorable way and be engaged with meaningful conversation.

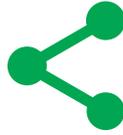
IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR GATHER

What do you mean by weekly gathering?

As our church moves into the first stages of reopening, we have more flexibility with how we meet with students. Even though our ministry as a whole cannot meet together, our small groups can get together as long as we practice appropriate social distancing. While you can still get together on Zoom or in another digital fashion, we'd love to see your groups meeting together once a week face-to-face!

Where should our groups meet for each weekly gathering?

Get creative! Some groups (not all at once) are free to use the Student Ministries Center or even the Ministry Land, and you can meet up in homes or somewhere in the community as well. It is important, though, that you communicate your weekly plan with our student ministry team and the students/parents of your life group each week so that we are able to clearly connect people to their gathering. Let us know by Sunday of that week so that we can help inform parents, reserve spaces/resources, or even plan to participate ourselves!



CONNECT

What should a typical weekly gathering look like?

There are only two major guidelines: (1) make it memorable, and (2) make it meaningful. There's flexibility in what that looks like for your group. You might get together to play games or just hang out, or even do a service project! We'll be happy to help you with ideas. If you plan to meet in the Student Ministries Center, be thinking about a Wednesday night, but as long as you communicate clearly and in advance, you can meet with your life group any night of the week.

What are some ideas for a memorable weekly gathering?

Here are several resources that we would recommend checking out for some inspiration!

- <https://drive.google.com/open?id=15y-aF3Xh8Po7dFRmXJjb-dkXYH-H-kqJ>
- <https://www.tansquaredyouthministry.com/2017/06/complete-guide-to-small-groups/>
- <https://youthgroup.downloadyouthministry.com/>

What should we do to make our weekly gathering meaningful?

Our student pastors are planning new content that will be tailored toward the weekly gathering experience! You can expect a leader's guide and a short video from Pastor Brian and Pastor Jackson each week that you can use as a starting point with your group. We would recommend setting aside some time to talk through the guide and watch the video together during your gathering.



STAGE 3: BIBLE READING

At this stage, we want students to be engaged in a daily Bible reading plan with their peers and be comfortable asking questions.

"Bible Reading" involves a likely smaller group of students within a life group, but should be an opportunity with regular entry points made available to all where students are engaged in and held accountable to a daily devotional.

IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR BIBLE READING

How do I engage students and hold them accountable to a daily devotional?

We recommend using the YouVersion Bible App! Once you and your students have downloaded the app, you can send them invitations to join a Bible Reading Plan together. Once the invites are out, the app does all the work by creating a daily schedule, sending reminders, and putting a check mark by the names of the students who have done their reading each day.

What Bible Reading Plan should I use with my group?

There are lots of options, but here are a few that we would recommend to start out, all of which are accessible through YouVersion:

- "Christian"
- "Spiritual Practices"
- "Kickstart a Conversation With God"
- "Everyday Worship"
- "Getting It Right With Others"



As you determine the plan that's right for your life group, make sure that you stick with the shorter ones--we want to have regular on-ramps for new students to begin reading with you. And get your students involved in the decision! After your first plan or two, encourage them to pick one out. By being a part of the decision, they'll have ownership and increased commitment.

What if my students don't have phones to download the app?

YouVersion is accessible through the computer, so as long as they have an opportunity for internet access they will be able to engage in a Bible Reading Plan with you. We would encourage you to follow up with the parents of any students who have trouble accessing it to cast vision for the practice's value and find a solution that's right for them.

How do I get students to participate in a Bible Reading Plan with me?

Make it a regular practice at your weekly gathering to bring up the opportunity to read together. And anytime that you finish a plan, make sure to use your regular communication channel to get the new one going! As students see and hear what their peers are doing, they'll form a desire to be involved themselves.



STAGE 4: PRAYER

At this stage, we want to foster trust and vulnerability with each student, and for them to be prayed for regularly, as well as praying for their peers regularly.

"Prayer" involves a likely smaller group of students within a life group, but should be an opportunity with regular entry points made available to all where students are sharing prayer requests and actively praying for the requests of their peers.

IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR PRAYER

How do I get students to start sharing prayer requests and actively praying for each other?

YouVersion is an awesome platform! Your life group can post prayer requests and share them with each other, as well as mark that they've prayed for the requests of their peers. This is also something that we recommend making a part of your weekly gathering, though it shouldn't be limited to you taking prayer requests. In fact, success here means we are getting students to take the initiative and pray for their peers!

What if none of my students are willing to pray?

Discipleship toward spiritual maturity is a process, and it takes time. Odds are, many of your students will be resistant to this at first. But, as you engage in the previous stages of this process consistently, you'll find that some students will be ready for more. Lead by example and follow up with them individually about prayer throughout the week, and continue challenging them to pray for their peers.



STAGE 5: ENCOURAGING

At this stage, we want to challenge students to reach their peers, specifically by encouraging others to connect.

"Encouraging" involves challenging core students in a life group outside of a weekly gathering to reach out to their peers and create connection.

IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR ENCOURAGING

How do I help students become encouragers?

Usually, it's as simple as identifying your core students (those who are moving forward and engaging in this process) and challenging them individually to reach out to their peers. This isn't a mass appeal for your life group, it's an individual challenge for spiritually maturing students to step up to the plate.

What should I say to a student who I think is ready to be an encourager?

Think of the positives that you're noticing about their spiritual growth and celebrate them with the student. Have they been committed to your weekly gathering? Celebrate! Have they been engaged in your Bible Reading Plan? Celebrate! Have they been praying for their peers? Celebrate! And then capitalize on the moment by challenging them to take the next step in their spiritual walk by starting to reproduce their own spiritual maturity in others. We would recommend challenging them with one next step (inviting a peer to your gathering, calling a friend, etc.), and then another as they take it.



STAGE 6: INFLUENCING

At this stage, we want to challenge students to help their peers move toward spiritual maturity, specifically by influencing them to engage in both Bible reading and prayer.

"Influencing" involves challenging core students in a life group to share personal testimony and challenge their peers to join in on the activities of the core group.

IDEAS & RESOURCES FOR INFLUENCING

How do I help students become influencers?

This one is simple, though it's a hard challenge for a student to rise to. Identify your core students (those who are moving forward and engaging in this process) and give them an opportunity to influence their peers towards spiritual maturity. One practical way might be asking a student to share a personal story of how your Bible Reading Plans have impacted them over the past few weeks at your weekly gathering. Or, challenge them to begin praying for and talking with one of their peers in the group who they believe can take the next step in their faith by committing to a Bible Reading Plan or regular prayer. The possibilities are endless here, but the idea is the same. Find leadership opportunities for your spiritually mature students to influence others toward spiritual growth.

SUMMARY

What does the win look like?

Remember our purpose as shepherds of students: to move them toward spiritual maturity. At the end of this season of ministry, here's the picture of what we want to be:

- Life group leaders are making regular contact with prospective students
- Life groups have a weekly (preferably in-person) gathering
- Life groups have a group of core students engaged in daily Bible reading
- Students are praying and being prayed for regularly
- Students are encouraging their peers to connect with their life group
- Students are influencing their peers to commit to daily Bible reading and prayer

How do we know that we are winning?

Bottom line, we're winning when we have students moving through this process--connect, grow, impact. That's discipleship, and that's our mission! But practically, we can get a pretty good idea of how we're doing (as life groups, and as a ministry) by measuring the next steps that students take.

Simply stated, a next step is any action a person takes towards connecting with God and others, growing individually and collectively, and impacting our church and community.

And if you've been following this process, you should already be sensing some tangible, measurable next steps! We want to track:

- Students who have been contacted
- Students who have participated in a weekly gathering
- Students who have engaged in a daily Bible Reading plan
- Students who have engaged in prayer for and with their peers
- Students who have encouraged others to connect
- Students who have influenced their peers to commit

When we keep a pulse on the next steps that students are taking, we ultimately keep a pulse on the health of our life groups and ministry.

How do I track the next steps of my students?

We've got a tool for you! You can access our Next Steps spreadsheet and fill in your numbers here:

- <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1AUO2nuU6K5nBPAOYcwvIAMBxoxWNll2r3L-jOH4xXpQ/edit?usp=sharing>

We are in the middle of the biggest culture shift of our lives. Now, more than ever, we need accurate ways of evaluating our ministry. Otherwise, we're putting ourselves in a vulnerable position and losing sight of the goal. We want a ministry full of active participants, continually moving towards spiritual maturity. By tracking these next steps, we can see our progress in that pursuit.

Some final thoughts...

A thought for you:

As a new Christian, who were some of the people who stood out as major influences? What did they do with you or say to you that helped encourage you as a Christian and point you to Jesus? Do you find yourself doing/saying similar things with your students now?

A thought for your students:

How can pursuing this process help you to be more of an influence in your students' lives? If the research shows that students are looking up to you, how does this change the way you interact with them? Your commitment to them? Does it?

Adapted from the 2019-2020
Adolescence in the Church Trend Report
by NeverTheSame

Questions?

Contact Jackson Richardson
Middle School Pastor
jrichardson@hhbc.net