

# Small Groups at the Virginia Beach Community Chapel

From the beginning, the Virginia Beach Community Chapel has determined to *not* be a church in which ministry is performed only by a select few, with the remainder of the congregation being mere recipients and spectators. Instead, we have taken to heart the tenet that the pastor/shepherds of the church exist to equip the congregation for ministry (Ephesians 4:12) and that the growth and strengthening of the body occurs through the working of every part of the body (Ephesians 4:16). This, in essence, is “decentralized” ministry, and it cannot be accomplished in large groups or weekly worship services alone.

This philosophy of decentralized ministry is reflected in the Purpose statement found in our Constitution (Article III), which lists worship first, followed by “training in personal growth and ministry”. This emphasis is repeated in our Charter (Article IV), which simply stated is the Great Commission. But it goes further to specify that it is to be carried out at the Chapel by members who are *committed to the Lordship of Christ and to one another*, ministering as good stewards the manifold grace of God (I Peter 4:10, 11).” Further, among the Distinctives of the Chapel (Article V):

1. “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12)
2. “promote meaningful, intelligent and significant *involvement of every believer* in global evangelism”(emphasis added)
3. “exercise of Christian stewardship by *every believer* of his time, his gifts”(emphasis added)
4. “normality of consistent growth toward spiritual maturity”.

Furthermore the Constitution is clear that the task of equipping the saints for the work of ministry is to be carried out by the elders as well as the paid pastoral staff. (Article X, Section B).

Therefore, out of a profound sense of obligation before God under His Word and this Constitution, and to the congregation of the Chapel, the elders are committed to guiding the various ministries of the Chapel in a way that best facilitates authentic shepherding care to all of the congregation, and to provide frequent and valuable opportunities for works of ministry by all of the congregation.

While large gatherings for worship, training and fellowship are central to the Chapel’s identity and crucial to its unity under Christ, it is self-evident that these provide limited opportunity for shepherding care by one man or even a dozen men. Only the extremely bold or exceptionally well-trained believers are apt to find opportunity in a large gathering to try their hand at ministry. On the other hand, smaller gatherings, by their nature, tend to facilitate meaningful interaction over God’s Word, mutual encouragement, and personal discipleship. A system of shepherding care and every-member ministry in the context of small groups working in coordinated and complementary fashion with large group gatherings will lead to the growth and strengthening of the body.

Decentralized pastoral care and a small group ministry focus are new paradigms that can appear threatening to the traditional view of church as centered around senior pastor ministry and large worship services on Sunday morning. Those that are uncomfortable with small group ministry are nevertheless part of the body, and therefore deserving of shepherding care and equipping for ministry. Small group participation should not be forced, and will not be a condition for membership, but is instead encouraged through a combination of excellence in the small group leadership and elder and pastoral staff advocacy.

Ultimately, the goal is that the entire Chapel family would be motivated to participate in small groups by a desire to see the Chapel's Purpose,

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Charter and Distinctives become tangible realities in the day-to-day life of the church. May the Holy Spirit work through existing small groups and ministries to multiply small groups at the Chapel until they become our primary mode of ministry, not by coercion or regulation, but by God working through elders, small group leaders and participants to attract more and more of the congregation to vibrant worship, fellowship, and ministry in small groups.

Small groups are not a ministry, but instead are the primary tool through which ministry is to be done. As such, to the extent practicable, each ministry in the church should provide a decentralized pastoral care system for those involved in that ministry. While some ministries may also have large group ministry meetings, the small group is ultimately foundational to the life of the ministry. Some small groups may start with a focus on a ministry and move to community and others may start with community and move to a task, but the *overall goal of every group is to do life together.*

**In light of the above, the Chapel Pastors and Elders are committed to:**

1. Providing an intentional system of decentralized pastoral care through small groups.

Intentional decentralized pastoral care requires the creation of a support, mentoring, coaching and training system for small group leaders. Each small group leader can look to a coach for encouragement and support in the provision of shepherding care. No coach has more than five small group leaders to assist, and each coach can look to an elder or pastor for mentoring and pastoral care. Likewise, elders and pastors are limited in the number of leaders that they support, according to their gifting and availability.

2. The belief that small groups don't help the paid-staff shepherd the congregation, but rather that the paid-staff helps the small groups shepherd the congregation by equipping and supervising lay-leaders well.
3. The trained, equipped small group leader is seen as the first line of resource for shepherding care, with the coach, district pastor, staff pastor or director and the lead pastor backing up the leader and filling in gaps when a small group leader is not available.
4. Flexibility in the way the Chapel seeks to help people "connect" within the body.

Connecting points may include 1) geography; 2) affinity; 3) life stage; 4) common interests and/or 5) tasks. We have chosen to start with geography but honor affinity with decentralized groups. Ministries that hold their small groups on the church campus may start with life stage, common interests or task. Small Groups on campus are overseen by "Division Leaders" and when groups are off campus and arranged geographically they are overseen by "District Pastors".

5. The belief that relationships are the primary glue for assimilation and retention, especially for newcomers.

6. Encouraging new ministries to form small groups among their participants.
7. The goal that each person in a small group sees himself or herself as an integral and valuable part of the church.

Extra effort is expended to encourage commitment to the Chapel through church membership. Membership performs at least two vital functions. It clearly designates the person as one who is willing to submit to the care of a shepherd, and who also chooses to align themselves in unity with the larger body of the church

8. Encouraging each small group member to take ownership for some aspect of the group (leader, apprentice, worship, outreach, administration, childcare, hospitality, host home, etc).
9. Apprenticeships and the “open chair” are central to small group life. Approximately one out of every four people should be in the process of being equipped as a leader. Most groups intentionally multiply themselves through birthing. Reproduction is the norm, not the exception. Groups view themselves as the church’s primary vehicle for disciple-making. Mid-size groups function as fishing ponds or bridge events to move people into small groups or into worship. The worship services and small groups are “foundational” and mid-size groups are “elective” in nature.
10. Encouraging each leader of a small group to see himself as performing a critical role in the soul care, spiritual growth, body-life connection and equipping for ministry of the small group members.
11. Small Groups being the most logical and effective structure for unlimited growth.