

Connex Group Leader Orientation

A. Connex Group Philosophy

It's important that we are on the same page of what Connex Groups are and how they fit into the ministry of Heartland.

- As you may know, we are a two-wing church, we have a large group weekend service wing and a small group wing.
- We do small groups because we believe that discipleship and life transformation happen best in relationship, and ultimately the best place for that is in our long-term Life Groups.
- Life Groups will always be the best place for the church to be the church ... living *Real. Life. Together*. It's the place we develop meaningful friendships and give everyone the opportunity to walk out the 5 values of Heartland.
- Our end goal as a church is to have as many people in Life Groups as possible. We want Connex Groups be a gateway for helping move and bridge people toward Life Groups.

Connex groups are *A Step into Community*. They help our people in a number of ways:

- Remove obstacles for why some people don't want to be in small group.
 - Fear of long-term commitment.
 - Scheduling conflicts.
 - Fear of awkwardness if they don't like the others.
- Provide benefits
 - Exposes people to a healthy small short-term group making them more open to a long-term experience in a Life Group.
 - Allows people to get connected and meet new people.
 - Provides a temporary option while waiting to get into a Life Group.
 - Provides topic-specific content that may not be available elsewhere.
 - Gives opportunity for new leaders to try their hand at leading.
 - Allows groups that have connected well to transition into Life Groups.

We have our topics and content to disciple the people God brings us, but we are primarily asking each of you to provide a short-term experience, a snap shot, a taste that life IS better together.

B. Connex Leader Details

1. Registration Process

- People register online through the link on our website. The online platform that we use for small groups is Planning Center (which is also used for other church ministries). Instructions on how to use Planning Center is available on the Small Group Leaders' webpage at <https://www.heartlandalliance.ca/groups/small-group-leaders>.

- In Planning Center Groups, when someone requests to join a group, the leader(s) of that group will receive an email notification. Each new registration request will also appear just above your list of group members in your Planning Center Group.
- If you have questions/concerns about a group request or the person's suitability for the group, please contact your coach *before* accepting them to the group.
- Unless the group is staying open/drop-in group, registration closes two weeks (up to the start of the 3rd session) after the start of the group to allow for late registrants.

2. Contact group members ASAP/Accepting group requests

- You are your group members' first point of contact. Please contact them within two days:
 - Be welcoming and introduce yourself
 - Mention that you're excited/looking forward to meeting them
 - Give them the details about the group:
 - Meeting dates and omit dates (if any)
 - Meeting time and location with directions (or instructions/link if online)
 - Instructions about books/resources/payment
 - Details about anything they need to bring/do to prepare
- Don't be surprised if some people drop out last minute or don't show up ... it's the nature of sign-up groups like this. Please notify us of any drop-outs so we can update the group member list and accept any who may be on the waiting list.
- Create a warm environment from your first contact.
- Always be inviting and understanding. We are dealing with adults who have priorities that need to be juggled. Allow for flexible schedules. "We're going to miss you, but I understand."

3. First meeting reminder

- It is a good idea to send out a reminder email to the group about 24 - 48 hours before your first meeting. It can be something simple like, "I'm looking forward to seeing you at our first group night on 'day' at 'time'".
- Follow up with any no-shows or people who have missed the group. You can make arrangements with them to catch up on missed content if that is suitable. If they are no longer interested in the group, be understanding and let them know they are welcome to request another group whenever it is suitable for them.

4. Create community early

- Remember the main objective: to create a meaningful short-term experience of small group ... and you happen to do it around your particular topic.
- Consider a social the first night if your schedule allows.
- Have snacks at the start of the night during the first few weeks.
- Icebreakers are helpful in getting people connected and focused on sharing with others in the group (Handout available on our Small Group Leader page under "Downloadable Resources").
- Have a common values discussion in first week about expectations, things that are important such as: coming on time, notifying leaders if going to be absent, confidentiality, sharing openly, being good listeners, respect, etc.

- Please do not be harsh or controlling in this process but warm and conciliatory.
- Remember, a shorter time-frame requires us to be more intentional to build community.

5. Look after necessary details

- Discuss any curriculum costs, envelopes provided for books return to leader/church.
- Discuss calendar issues such as special event nights, or weeks off like spring break etc.

6. Sustain community

- Allow for warmup fellowship as people arrive.
- Take time to have personal prayer requests.
- Share your story as a leader in weeks 2-3. Be as open and transparent as possible and appropriate.
- Consider calling or connecting with group members outside of the group if appropriate.
- For group members who missed a week or are struggling to stay connected, perhaps a quick text or call is all they need to feel encouraged to continue. It is ok to be open handed in your approach, some people aren't ready to be committed to a group. However, a leader's encouragement or care can go a long way for those who are facing challenges of being in community or from what God is bringing to the surface in their walk with him.

7. Semester Schedule

- Groups have been setup with both start dates and end dates, and so we highly encourage that group nights not be cancelled unless it's an emergency.
- Be sure to complete evaluations the last or second last week of your group.

8. Be sensitive to life situations

- Understand that people may be coming from all walks of life, different relationship situations (i.e. common-law, recently separated or divorced, gay or lesbian) and different places in their spiritual journey (different denominations, faiths or no religion at all). From a Connex Group perspective, *all* are welcome to engage in a short-term small group experience without being condemned. Do your best to help *all* those in your group to feel welcomed, safe and valued no matter the situation or background they come from.

9. Pursue His Presence

- Begin with prayer some time near the beginning and consider ending your time with group prayer or by breaking into groups of 3-4 and having them pray for each other. Be sensitive to the mix of your group – do you have other religions present, non-believers, those new to the faith and won't feel comfortable to share ... etc.
- Look for creative worship opportunities - times of silence/listening prayer, sentence prayers of praise, sentence prayers of thanksgiving, pray a Psalm aloud, watch/listen to a praise song or YouTube video.
- Be sensitive to where your people are at spiritually. If you have unbelievers, be sure to keep opportunities appropriate and optional.

10. Serve Others Freely

- Talk with your group about the possibility of serving together once during the semester.
- Have a discussion about where those in your group may already be serving.

11. Bridge to Life Groups

- Begin to discuss Life Groups in the last few weeks of the semester. Encourage members to contact church or request a group on-line.
- Have a group discussion about how the semester has gone and if anyone is talking about going on into other groups together, etc.
- Consider the possibility that your group turn into a Life Group.

12. Parameters of Shepherding

- If a group member is struggling through issues that you feel ill-equipped to handle, talk to your Pastor/Coach. We are here to help in whatever way is necessary.
- Shepherd the heart of your people through the lens of love and acceptance.