

*Using Small Groups to Improve
the Ministry of a Growing Congregation*

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by

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Introduction

“The gates of Hades will not overcome it.”¹ This is Jesus’ promise to His people. The gates of hell will not overcome Christ’s Church. But this does not mean the enemies of Christ’s Church will not try. The evil three – the devil, the world and man’s sinful flesh – will war against God’s people until the end of time. It is spiritual warfare. It is a war fought for the plunder of people’s souls.

In order to wage a war soldiers need weapons. The Church’s King has provided them. As Jesus’ people employ his Word and sacraments the lies of the enemy are exposed and the attacks of the enemy are thwarted. God’s law exposes the seriousness of man’s sin while God’s gospel exposes the fullness of God’s forgiveness.² The evil three lie about both these truths. Over and over again they launch attacks and over and over again the Church must repel those attacks using the same weapons of truth she has always used.³

But Christ commands his Church to do more. He not only promises to defend his Church, He commands her to go on the offensive.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.⁴

The weapons Jesus gives His Church for the winning of souls are the same weapons He gives for the defending of souls – His Word and sacraments.

¹ Matthew 16:18

² Romans 6:23

³ Ephesians 6:10-17

⁴ Matthew 28:18-20

This then is the mission of Christ's Church – preach the Word and administer the sacraments for the winning and defending of souls. It sounds simple enough. And in a sense it is. But as the years go by and the world changes, the ways the Church communicates the gospel must also change. Sometimes the need for these changes is obvious, such as the need to proclaim the gospel in a new language in a foreign mission setting. At other times the need for change is less obvious, such as the need to adjust to changing technology and changing cultural norms. As strongly as the Church strives to purely preach the Word of God, she will just as strongly strive to avoid putting up unnecessary barriers to the proclamation of God's Word. The spiritual challenges to the Church are daunting enough without adding technological and sociological challenges. In other words, the Church will want to do all she can to eliminate earthly barriers so she can bring the full force of God's Word and sacraments to bear on the spiritual enemies she faces.

This thesis will demonstrate the importance of adjusting a Christian congregation's ministry to the changing circumstances both within and around it. Specifically, it will demonstrate the effectiveness of intentionally developing relationships among the members of a congregation by the creation of a small groups ministry and how these relationships positively affect the congregation's ability to proclaim God's Word and administer his sacraments.

Why a small groups ministry? Because of what Jesus answered when he was asked, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"⁵ He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."⁶ The small group ministry developed and implemented at Resurrection Evangelical

⁵ Matthew 22:36

⁶ Matthew 22:37,38

Lutheran Church in Chesapeake, Virginia in 2009–2010 was designed to help her people do both – love God by serving his Church and love others by serving them.

What does this have to do with the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments? When members of a Christian congregation are not loving God by serving in their congregation, they do not have a sense of “ownership” in the congregation’s mission. This can lead to a lack of participation, not only in ministry, but also in worship and bible study. They become separated from the Word and sacraments. When members of a Christian congregation do not actively love one another, some members begin to feel alienated. This can lead to a lack of participation in worship and bible study. They become separated from the Word and sacraments. When members of a Christian congregation do not actively and visibly love the people of their community it makes it more challenging to create opportunities to present the gospel to those people. It can thwart the proclamation of the Word and the opportunity to administer the sacraments. The creation of small groups, then, can *indirectly* affect the application of the Means of Grace to those both within the Church and those without.

Introducing a new ministry model due to changing circumstances is nothing new for God’s Church. Scripture gives us examples of such adjustments. Moses’ delegation after receiving counsel from his father-in-law in the Old Testament and the apostles’ delegation to deacons after hearing about the paucity of provisions for some of the poor in the New Testament quickly comes to mind.⁷ While not prescriptions for us, these examples are helpful descriptions of how some of our forefathers changed when change was needed.

⁷ Exodus 18, Acts 6

Resurrection's History

Resurrection began as an outreach effort by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod⁸ in the mid 1960s to serve Lutheran military personnel in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area. Worship services were held in the living rooms of members for the first few months and then in rented facilities for a few years until a church building was purchased in Virginia Beach in 1972. The fifty-six hundred square foot facility would serve the congregation admirably for the next thirty-five years. Resurrection experienced steady growth in the 1970s and 1980s reaching a membership of over two hundred souls by the early 1990s.⁹ She also daughtered two congregations during that time – one in Yorktown, Virginia and another in Suffolk, Virginia. The 1990s saw Resurrection's growth plateau.¹⁰

With the help of *Forward with Lutheran Schools*¹¹, Resurrection conducted a study in 1999 to determine if opening a preschool was feasible. The study concluded that Resurrection's facilities were not adequate for the ministries she was already conducting, much less the addition of a preschool. In January of 2000 a building committee was formed to explore facility expansion options. A seven year effort resulted in the congregation relocating to a newly built, twenty thousand square foot facility in neighboring Chesapeake, about five miles from her previous home in Virginia Beach. In November of 2007 Resurrection held her first worship service in her new facility.

⁸ The acronym WELS will be used to refer to this church body for the remainder of the paper.

⁹ Resurrection numbered 62 souls in 1971, 164 souls in 1981 and 238 souls in 1991.

¹⁰ By 1998 Resurrection numbered 228 souls.

¹¹ A consulting service offered by the WELS to assist congregations in evaluating the viability of opening a Christian school.

Identifying Resurrection's Weaknesses

By the grace of God and the generosity of his people, Resurrection had adjusted to the growth of the congregation with regard to her facility. Resurrection had not, however, adequately adjusted to the growth of the congregation with regard to her ministries. The addition of a second pastor in 2006 had helped by allowing one pastor to continue focusing on reaching out to the community while the other pastor focused on ministering to the souls under Resurrection's care. But the structure of her ministries had not yet made the necessary adjustments. This reality became even more obvious as Resurrection's growth accelerated as a result of her move to a larger, more visible facility.¹² Serving four hundred fifteen souls turned out to be a very different task from serving fifty or even two hundred fifty souls.

In the spring of 2009, Resurrection's pastors began discussing options for addressing the weaknesses they saw in Resurrection's ministries. The main areas of weakness identified were:

- Communication within the congregation;
- Organizing service opportunities;
- Ministry to the weak and straying.

One reason for these weaknesses was that the Lord was richly blessing the congregation with new members, both through adult confirmations as well as professions of faith.¹³ These new members, however, were not consistently assimilated into the family of Resurrection. They did not always identify the church as *their* congregation. They did not feel ownership of the church or her ministries. They were not creating relationships within the congregation. This led to an unacceptable number of new members straying within the first year or two after joining the church.

¹² In 2007 Resurrection numbered 328 souls. In March of 2011 Resurrection numbers 415 souls.

¹³ In the first 40 months in Chesapeake Resurrection celebrated 35 adult confirmations and 33 professions of faith.

Additionally, long time members felt frustration because they did not feel the same sense of family they had enjoyed when the congregation was smaller. They rejoiced at the growth God was providing but were perplexed that new members were not becoming as involved as members had in years past. There was also a perception that they were not as informed about what was happening with Resurrection's ministries as they once had been.

Serving more souls was the first change to which Resurrection needed to adjust. A second and ancillary change was the extremely rapid technological advances that had taken place in the last ten to fifteen years. These changes in technology dramatically affected how members communicate. Something needed to be done.

In order to adapt her ministry model to these changing realities, Resurrection first had to carefully evaluate what exactly made the congregation's weaknesses weak. The common denominator was a lack of relationships between people within the congregation. There were many relationships to be sure, but not enough, especially among newer members. In addition, the way the ministries were organized worked against those relationships rather than capitalizing on them.¹⁴

Resurrection's leaders asked themselves questions like these:

- Who is more likely to receive and retain a piece of information about the church:
 - a) Someone who sees the information in a mass communication (like the church bulletin or the church website) or
 - b) Someone who is given the information from a person they know and trust?

¹⁴ For example, expecting women to join the Women in Service group when they had never met anyone in the group. This meant it was less likely that they would attend meetings because to them it was a group of strangers. Additionally, it meant that no one had personally explained what this group did. How reasonable is it to expect a new member to attend something called the "Women in Service Quarterly Business Meeting" after seeing an announcement for it in the weekly church newsletter? How many young women are going to give up their precious free time to attend something called a "business meeting" where she expects to walk into a room full of people she's never met in order to accomplish a goal she doesn't know?

- Who is more likely to volunteer to serve on a ministry team (like ushering or evangelism):
 - a) Someone who sees a request for volunteers to serve and that asks them to contact a person they've never met for more information or
 - b) Someone who is personally invited to serve on that ministry team by someone they know and trust?

- Who is more likely to attend a bible class:
 - a) Someone who sees an invitation in the bulletin or
 - b) Someone who is personally invited by someone they know and trust?

- Who is more likely to attend a fellowship event like a potluck dinner?
 - a) Someone who sees an announcement about it in the bulletin or
 - b) Someone who is personally invited by someone they know and trust?

- Who is more likely to volunteer at a church workday?
 - a) Someone who sees an announcement in the bulletin or
 - b) Someone who is personally encouraged to do so by someone they know and trust *and* who will know whether they attended?

- Who is more likely to agree to share their problems and concerns when they have strayed from the church?
 - a) Someone who receives a cold call from a man they've never met who says he's an elder from the church or
 - b) Someone who receives a phone call from a person they've gotten to know and whom they trust?

In every case the answer is b. The problem at Resurrection was that new members were not developing relationships within the congregation the way members had in the past when Resurrection was smaller.¹⁵ Resurrection's failure to create relationships among her members

¹⁵ One example: recently a new member of the council was appointed. He had been a member for about three years. When he attended his first council meeting he had to be introduced to one of the other council members who had been a member for about two years. This would never have happened ten years earlier. In a church of 200 people these two men would almost certainly have met and probably served alongside each other in some capacity within six months of joining the church.

especially affected the three areas of ministry in which she was weak – communication, service and soul care.

Communication

In smaller congregations communication often takes place through word of mouth. This is effective because most people know most other people. As a congregation grows this method becomes less effective. Even the most socially interactive members do not know everyone in the congregation. People pockets develop. In his book, *Sticky Church*, Larry Osbourne puts it this way:

I think of people as being like Legos. We all have a limited number of connectors. Introverts have a few. Some extroverts have dozens. But either way, once they're full, they're full. And when that happens, we tend to be friendly but not to connect...It's why so many people complain about churches being cliquish. The reality is, it's not so much a church full of cliques as it is a church full of people whose connectors are already full.¹⁶

The people in these pockets communicate with one another but communication between pockets is accidental at best and nonexistent at worst. In addition, a larger congregation makes it easier for some members to isolate themselves since few people will notice. In reality, the congregation is made up of two entities: Pockets of people and isolated individuals. The exceptions to this reality are the pastors who know everyone.

Not only did Resurrection have the challenge of communicating with more people, she also had the twenty-first century challenge of communicating in so many *ways* with her members. As recently as thirty years ago the church leadership had essentially three ways to communicate with members: In writing, by telephone or by personal visit. Since these were the only options, people paid more attention to all three. They tended to read written communication (such as a newsletter or flyer in their church mailbox). They tended to answer their home

¹⁶ p. 79,80

telephone when it rang (there were few answering machines and many women worked from the home). This made communicating with volunteers simpler. Today things are radically different. It is not uncommon for a person to use as many as six forms of communication.¹⁷ While these technologies make communication easier, it also makes communication much more complicated. It is difficult to know who prefers which form of communication. It is also difficult to know who has received information the church has distributed.

New technologies have also vastly increased the amount of information people are receiving and sifting through every day. They are dealing with information overload. The more information people receive, the more adept they become at picking which information they choose to absorb. As a church grows larger, it often offers more ministries. More things are going on which means more information needs to be communicated. This creates a challenge. When people are overwhelmed with information (much of which does not apply to them) they give up and ignore all of the information.¹⁸

Service

Every Christian wants to serve Christ's Church. Christ instills this desire in the Christian's heart.¹⁹ It is never a perfect desire in any Christian but it is a present desire in every Christian. In order to capitalize on this reality, every congregation needs to do two things: Use God's Word and sacraments to nurture the desire to serve and organize itself in as efficient a way as possible to make the most of the service of God's people. Service in the Church can cover a

¹⁷ Home telephone, cell phone, e-mail, text messaging, twitter, web sites, social networking sites like *Facebook*, personal visits, written communication, etc.

¹⁸ Think of when someone opens a new gadget with a set of directions. Do they read the detailed 25-page instruction book or do they grab the 2 page "Getting Started Quickly" flyer? Check out *Google's* homepage. It is extremely simple. That's what makes it stand out. That's why people are drawn to it. How much of the information the church shares needs to be known by *everyone* in the congregation? How much of it is specific to a smaller number of members?

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:10

very broad range of activities. Resurrection wanted to address both the services her people were performing to provide a place to preach the Word and administer the sacraments as well as the services her people performing for one another. These services ranged from maintaining the church facilities to making proper preparations for the celebration of the Lord's Supper to serving fellowship meals to helping individual members in emergencies.

When a church is small, people tend to get involved in serving rather naturally. There are reasons for this:

- The needs of the church facility are more obvious because the physical plant is smaller;
- The needs of fellow members are better known because in a smaller group people know each other better and therefore know one another's needs;
- The office staff knows every member on a rather intimate level and so is aware of every member's unique gifts, interests and abilities. This allows the staff to call upon people to serve when needed;
- Because communication is better in a small church, people are more aware of service opportunities. While George and Jim have a cup of coffee before bible class, George asks Jim if he's going to be at the church workday the following Saturday. This is a typical way for information to be spread in a small church;
- There is a sense of accountability in a small group. If Jim doesn't attend the church workday, people will notice and will probably let him know about it.

In a large church these realities go away:

- The physical plant is so big that people do not know what needs to be done;
- People do not know other people as well (unless there has been a concerted effort to create relationships) so they do not know what other people's needs are;
- It becomes more difficult and complicated for the office staff to keep track of who is interested in and gifted to do what;

- There is not as much accountability. A “someone else will do it” mentality sets in;²⁰
- Because everyone does not know everyone, committee chairs and coordinators do not know who can do what. As a result, the committee chairs and coordinators do one of three things:
 1. Do it themselves;
 2. Call upon the people in their sphere of relationships. Thus, the same people tend to be asked over and over again to serve;²¹
 3. Ask the pastors if they know anyone who can do whatever task needs doing.²²

Caring for Struggling Souls

Prior to the formation of small groups, when a member was struggling spiritually,

Resurrection had three ways of ministering to them:

- One of the pastors noticed and contacted the person
- One of the pastors noticed and assigned one or two elders to contact the person
- A fellow member noticed and contacted the person

Any of these three ministries could be a blessing to those who were struggling. Nevertheless, each had inherent weaknesses:

²⁰ This often leads to frustration on the part of the members who *are* serving. There is much more to do than there was when the church was small but the number of people serving has not grown at the same rate as the amount of work to be done. Most of the work *does* get done, though, because of the extraordinary efforts of those who are serving. Since most things are getting done it only reinforces the “someone else will do it” mentality. This vicious cycle must be broken or it will lead to well-ingrained frustration on the part of those serving and well-ingrained apathy on the part of those not serving.

²¹ An example of this could be found in our Women In Service group. For all of the congregation’s history, the women’s group served faithfully and carried out many of the ministries that made the congregation what it was. As Resurrection grew, however, it became more difficult to find women willing to serve on the WIS board. And, the women who did serve had a more difficult time finding volunteers to help with the various ministries. The reason? New women didn’t know what WIS was and the women involved in WIS didn’t know the new women so that they could tell them about it. When volunteers were needed, the women on the board reverted to asking the women they knew, who felt like they were doing everything and had been doing everything for years. Meanwhile, I had newer members telling me, “I’d love to serve but I’m never asked.” Somewhere there was a disconnect!

²² This makes sense since the pastors are the only ones who know everyone. However, the pastors become the *de facto* human resource department of the congregation. The larger the congregation grows, the more time consuming this becomes. The pastors are the “go to guys” for almost everything because they are the only ones every member knows.

- The pastors could only personally minister to a certain number of souls effectively. The outreach pastor had between thirty to forty non-members under his care on a regular basis. These were not mature Christians and required more time and focus than would a seasoned, experienced Christian. His care of non-members could easily consume his entire care ministry. This would leave the in-reach pastor to personally minister to Resurrection's four hundred fifteen souls. Of these, some thirty were long time straying and another thirty were showing early signs of straying - sixty serious spiritual situations that need tending. Sixty souls means there were thirty to forty households involved. Suppose it was forty. That would mean forty personal visits that needed to be made. The in-reach pastor had one to two nights per week and some Saturdays to make visits. If he were able to make four visits per week it would take him ten weeks to visit each person once. With his other obligations thrown in this means at best he could visit each person once every three to four months. And this assumes no other personal ministry to any of the other members of Resurrection on either weeknights or Saturdays. It was not possible for one pastor to personally minister to all of these situations effectively.
- If the pastors could not personally minister to those who needed special care, how about Resurrection's elders? They certainly worked hard to help and were a great blessing to the congregation. The problem for the elders was the same as that of the pastors. The elders went out in teams of two to visit straying members. On their best months each team made two to three visits. For the elders to visit every member showing early signs of straying (about thirty members) every month, Resurrection would have needed a minimum of fifteen elders. Even if the congregation had been blessed with that many elders, those elders did not personally know some of the people who were straying. It is very difficult to minister to a straying member whom you have never met.
- Resurrection's members gave one another a great deal of love, support and encouragement. There are two weaknesses in member-to-member soul care ministry though. First, there is no way for the leadership to know if this is happening. It is random and unorganized. Second, many of those who strayed did so because they never formed any close relationships with other members of Resurrection. Therefore, there was no one to notice that they were missing or to love them enough to help.

Why Small Groups Would Help

It is one thing to identify a lack of relationships within the congregation as the common cause of weakness in three areas of ministry. It is another to develop a ministry that will actually address those weaknesses. Resurrection was convinced that a small group ministry would do just that.

Better Communication

A small group model would improve communication because it would address all three of the communication challenges mentioned earlier:

- Challenge #1 - More People

A small group ministry model would capitalize on the existing reality of people pockets. Instead of trying to communicate everything to the entire congregation directly, church leaders would be able to communicate with the small group coordinators who would then pass the information on to the members of their groups. This would be a benefit in a couple of ways. First, it would allow communication to become more personal. For example, a small group leader could personally make a phone call to each of her families. This would be impossible for the church office staff to do. Second, it would allow the office staff to identify where communication is breaking down when it did. Is a small group leader not getting the information? Is a small group leader not distributing the information? It would be relatively simple to diagnose.

- Challenge #2 - More Forms of Communication

In Twenty-First Century America a common question is “What is the best way to contact you?” With so many options, it is extremely helpful to know which forms of communication each person prefers. A small group ministry model would allow the leader to find out what each member prefers. This would be extremely difficult for the church office staff to either discover or keep track of.

- Challenge #3 - More Information

A small group ministry would allow church leaders to streamline their information. For example, instead of placing a flyer in the bulletin announcing the upcoming opening for the Pioneers, the Pioneer leader could send an e-mail to all of the small group coordinators who could then forward the information only to the families with children in that age group. Since the leader knows the best way to communicate with each family, the proper form of communication would be used (*Facebook* for some, e-mail for others, a personal phone call for still others). This would mean that the amount of information each member received from the church would be greatly reduced which would in turn allow church leaders to highlight the truly important congregation-wide pieces of information.

Better Service

Small groups would also be service groups. Rather than a general call to serve for things like potluck lunches, each small group could be assigned a number of service projects each year. For example, a group might be assigned the tasks of organizing the Reformation potluck and the church picnic. Another might be assigned the church anniversary and the Chesapeake Jubilee booth. On church workdays, each small group could be assigned certain tasks. This arrangement would have two advantages. First, it would provide more defined areas of responsibility. People would know what is expected of them. Second, it would provide more accountability. Each person would be aware that if he/she fails to serve it would mean putting more of a burden on the other members of their group.

Another advantage of small groups with regard to service would be the ability to identify individual talents and interests. The group coordinators would know their people and would therefore know their talents and interests. If the maintenance chairman needed someone to do plumbing work, he could contact the group coordinators and ask if they had anyone in their group with this skill. The group coordinator could then facilitate communication between the maintenance chairman and the member of his group with this skill. This was essentially what was already happening except that the only people with knowledge about people's talents and interests were the pastors. Small groups would shift this responsibility from the pastors to the small group coordinators.

A third advantage of small groups with regard to service would be a better ability to seek volunteers through personal invitation. Personal invitation is always the most effective way of

recruiting volunteers. Small groups would allow us to ask for volunteers through someone people know and trust, i.e. group coordinators.

Better Care of Struggling Souls

Small groups' ability to create relationships was at the heart of its advantages in the areas of ministry where Resurrection was weak. Perhaps nowhere was this truer than in the care of struggling souls. Instead of two pastors and a few elders personally caring for four hundred fifteen people, small groups would assist all of Resurrection's people in caring for each other. If someone stopped attending church, for example, others in her small group would notice. They would reach out to her. She would be more likely to share her heart with them because she knows them and trusts them. The pastors and elders would always be available to assist in whatever manner necessary but the small groups would provide a "first line of love." A particular advantage in this area would be the capitalization of the talents and abilities of our female members. The women of Resurrection excel in love and encouragement. Additionally, they could minister to other women when these women might be less likely to share their heart with a man.

Designing the New Ministry

Once Resurrection had evaluated the way in which a lack of relationships was negatively affecting Resurrection's ministry in these three areas, the congregation was ready to begin developing a small group ministry that would address those weaknesses.

In reality, Resurrection already *had* small groups. Those who had been members for twenty-five, thirty or even forty years all knew each other and were friends with one another. Other groups of people knew each other because they all had infants or young children or were

all single, young adults. These groups already existed. The only question was whether Resurrection was going to design her ministries in ways that would capitalize on this reality or work against this reality. That Resurrection already had small groups should not have been a surprise. Whenever there is an institution with a large number of people (say, more than one hundred), it begins to divide up into sub groups. Notice the different groups at a high school, for example.

Perhaps it should be noted here that what has been one of the hallmarks of Christian small group ministries for decades would not be a feature of Resurrection's small group ministry, namely, bible study. There was good reason for this. Resurrection's leaders wanted to address the congregation's major weaknesses. Bible study was not one of them. Ideally every member of the congregation would attend bible class every chance they had. Not all of our members did this. However, all things considered, bible study had been one of Resurrection's strengths.²³ The congregation's weaknesses were communication, service and soul care.

Research

Before designing and implementing this new ministry, it seemed wise to speak with those who had already implemented a small group ministry in their congregations in order to discover what had worked for them. In the fall of 2009, the author contacted Rev. Jonathan Schroeder, pastor of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sharpsburg, Georgia. He was not able to share much about its success or failure yet because it had just been launched a month or two earlier. However, his reasons for starting it sounded strikingly similar to Resurrection's. Also, it was

²³ On an average Sunday we currently have 200-220 people in worship. Of those, 30-40 are children who attend Sunday School and 70-90 adults attend bible class. Additionally, on Wednesday evenings we offer one or two adult classes that average 25-35 in attendance.

encouraging to learn that someone else had a small group ministry that did not have bible study as one of its goals since this aspect of Resurrection's design was the most unusual.

Next, the author contacted Rev. Daron Lindemann, one of the pastors at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He had launched a small group ministry a year or two earlier. His situation was a bit different in that Grace is three or four times larger than Resurrection. However, the goals of his ministry were similar to Resurrection's and he was able to share how effective it was at Grace. Like Pastor Schroeder, Pastor Lindemann confirmed much of what Resurrection had been thinking about the way congregational dynamics work in Twenty-First Century America - specifically the critical role relationships play in a congregation's ministry.

Feedback

Knowing that this would be a new model for the congregation, Resurrection's leaders wanted to find out how members felt about going in a new direction. After fleshing out a basic model of what the ministry would look like,²⁴ Resurrection's mission counselor, Rev. Mark Birkholz, came to Chesapeake to lead a discussion of the idea with members in March of 2010.²⁵ The results were favorable and gave Resurrection's leaders confidence to move forward.²⁶

²⁴ See Appendix A. We used these very basic pictures to show the discussion groups how the new ministry model would differ from what we had done in the past.

²⁵ Pastor Birkholz led the discussions in March of 2010. Groups were made up of 10-15 people of varying backgrounds and ages. About 40 members took part in the discussions.

²⁶ See Appendix B for report by Pastor Mark Birkholz following his listening sessions.

A More Developed Design²⁷

First, a name for the new ministry was needed. The name would be important. It needed to be memorable, something quickly recognized when mentioned. It also needed to succinctly summarize the goal of the ministry. The name chosen was *Connect*.

The next step was to decide who would be involved in *Connect*. Since *Connect* would be used as a primary tool for communicating with Resurrection's members, it was decided that every member would be assigned to a *Connect* group. In other words, this would not be a voluntary ministry but mandatory. This is not to say that any of Resurrection's members would be obligated to be active in the ministries of their *Connect* group. How and to what extent they became involved was up to their Christian judgment. Rather, this meant that every member of Resurrection would also be a member of a *Connect* group. This was viewed as something similar to assigning every member a church mailbox. They may or may not use it but they all have one. Or, it might be compared to the way Resurrection carried out her elders' ministry for a number of years. Every family was assigned to an elder who was responsible for caring for that family.²⁸

Next, it was time to decide how to divide the congregation into *Connect* groups. This was a critical decision. In their discussions with Pastor Birkholz, some members expressed the opinion that the groups should be organized geographically. This had merit, particularly since Resurrection's members live in a rather broad geographical area.²⁹ Others felt the groups should

²⁷ See Appendix C for the basic plan in May of 2010.

²⁸ This still didn't completely answer the question of who would be involved, however. We wondered if *Connect* might be a tool we could use to help people in our *Life With Jesus* class more quickly assimilate into the congregation. (*Life With Jesus* is Resurrection's Bible Information class. All non-Lutherans are required to attend this class before joining Resurrection.) We decided it could. So, we planned to ask every person attending *Life With Jesus* if they would like to join a *Connect* group. This has proved to be extremely successful. Nearly everyone asked has enthusiastically said yes.

²⁹ Resurrection has members who live in Hampton (about 25 miles away), Smithfield, VA (about 30 miles away), Moyock, NC (about 20 miles away) and even Elizabeth City, NC (about 60 miles away)

be arranged according to age and interest. Still others felt the groups should be arranged in such a way as to mix ages and interests. The most important question to ask was, “What grouping has the highest probability of generating interest and participation?” The answer seemed obvious: Group people according to age and interest, according to life stage. As much as possible, groups would include people of similar ages and interests because they would be more likely to be interested in fellowshiping with like-minded people. Also, they would be more like-minded in their approach to service projects they carried out.³⁰ An additional bonus to this approach was that relationships that already existed would not be broken up. If a group of members had been attending Resurrection and were friends for twenty-five years, they became their own *Connect* group. With this decision made, the congregation was divided into groups. These groups were revised four times to ensure as good a combination as possible in each group.

Once the groups had been organized, they needed coordinators.³¹ This would also be critical to the success of the ministry. The coordinators had to have certain gifts:

- Be spiritually mature members of Resurrection;
- Be responsible individuals who can be counted on to follow through on tasks required of them;
- Have organizational and relational skills necessary to the position.

The responsibilities of the *Connectors* also needed to be defined. The following responsibilities were identified:

- Attend regular training provided by the pastor primarily responsible (no more than one meeting/month);
- Be in consistent communication with the church staff;

³⁰ For example, a small group made up of parents with infants would organize their service projects in such a way that it accommodated the unique challenges and schedules of their situation. It would also create a natural empathy for one another as they struggled with similar challenges. Similarly, a group of retirees could organize themselves to meet or fellowship at times during the week when working folks would not be available.

³¹ Group coordinators would be called *Connectors*.

- See that regular fellowship activities occur for the group (at least six per year);
- See that service projects assigned to the group are carried out;
- Communicate information from the church staff and leadership to appropriate members of the group;
- Meet with new members added to the group to begin building a relationship and present/discuss new member information;
- Be proactive in ministering to any members of the group who stray.

Not all of these responsibilities would need to be directly carried out by the *Connector*. The *Connector* would simply be responsible for making sure they were all being carried out. Each *Connector* would be free to delegate responsibilities as he/she saw fit.³²

Implementation

Now that the ministry had a name and a form, it was time to begin its implementation. The first step was to recruit and train the *Connectors*. In each *Connect* group, an individual was identified with the gifts needed by someone serving as a *Connector*. Pastor Roecker then personally contacted each person and asked if they would be willing to attend an informational meeting after which they could decide if this ministry was something in which they wished to participate. Most agreed. At the initial meeting the *Connect* ministry was briefly explained as well as what they were being asked to do as *Connectors*.³³ Ideas were also solicited on how the *Connect* idea might be improved from their perspective as prospective *Connectors*.³⁴

³² This is an example of one of the underlying principles of *Connect*. Very early in the development of *Connect* we decided we wanted to keep two principles in mind at all times – simplicity and flexibility. We did not want to overwhelm members, especially the *Connectors*, with a complicated ministry plan. We weren't going to hand them a huge, three-ring binder of "how to" instructions. They needed enough structure to understand what they were being asked to do but be allowed enough flexibility to carry out the ministry in the way that worked best for them and their group.

³³ A number of meetings were held to fit the schedules of the different potential *Connectors*. Recruiting *Connectors* and holding the initial meetings continued through July and August of 2010.

³⁴ See Appendix D for the overview of *Connect* that were used at this initial meeting.

By September of 2010 a *Connector* had successfully been recruited for each of the twelve *Connect* groups. It was time to introduce the ministry to the congregation. Pastor Roecker had done this informally for almost six months in casual conversations with members. By September, there was a certain buzz about it as many members had some idea that Resurrection was going to begin a small group ministry.

The formal introduction began in August when a Sunday morning bible study/*Connect* overview was presented during the education hour. This allowed many of Resurrection's most active members to understand what the ministry was hoping to accomplish, ask their questions, and give their input. This presentation, however, only reached about seventy members. So, in September, a very brief overview of *Connect* was presented after each worship service using a Power Point presentation. A simple brochure that explained the basics of this new ministry was also distributed.³⁵

Meanwhile, Pastor Roecker trained the newly recruited *Connectors*. They met in October for a bible study and an overview of the ministry.³⁶ The wisdom of leaving the ministry flexible became apparent immediately as the *Connectors* shared useful insights and helped shape how the ministry would work. It also became clear that each *Connector* was unique and would operate a bit differently from the others. Some would be hands on in practically every aspect of their group. Others would be more comfortable delegating responsibilities.

The next step in training the *Connectors* was introducing them to the members of their group. Pastor Roecker did this by personally meeting with each *Connector* and sharing information about every person in their group. In some cases the *Connector* was already very

³⁵ See Appendix E.

³⁶ See Appendix F for the bible study and agenda.

familiar with their people. In other cases they were complete strangers. Once he had met with all the *Connectors* the initial training was complete.

It was time to launch Resurrection’s new ministry. A letter of introduction was placed in the church mailbox of every member.³⁷ It explained a bit about *Connect*, informed them who their *Connector* was, and listed all of the other members of their *Connect* group. The *Connectors* were tasked with contacting each person in their group to introduce themselves and to set up an initial fellowship gathering. Most initial gatherings were held in November or December of 2010. After more than eighteen months of pondering, planning and implementing, Resurrection’s new ministry had arrived.

Evaluation

Six months after launching the *Connect* ministry an evaluation was conducted by asking some of the *Connectors* as well as a few very active members to complete a survey.³⁸ The survey consisted of two parts: A comparison of the *Connect* ministries to those same ministries prior to *Connect* and a S.W.O.T (Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats) analysis.

Both the *Connectors* as well as the members indicated that Resurrection’s ministries have improved in all three areas. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being “very poor” and 10 being “excellent” the average rankings of the *Connectors* were as follows:

Area of Ministry	Before <i>Connect</i>	After <i>Connect</i>
Communication	4	7
Service	4	7
Soul Care	3	6

³⁷ See Appendix G.

³⁸ See Appendix H

Using the same scale the average rankings of the members were as follows:

Area of Ministry	Before <i>Connect</i>	After <i>Connect</i>
Communication	4	8
Service	4	8
Soul Care	4	7

These numbers represent two important realities. Members of Resurrection are convinced that the *Connect* ministry is significantly improving all of the ministry areas the congregation wanted it to address. And members of Resurrection are convinced that those areas of ministry still need improvement. These two realities were borne out in the S.W.O.T. analysis as well.

Strengths

When commenting on the strengths of *Connect*, the *Connectors* mentioned every area of its ministry. They particularly identified communication and the development of personal relationships as strengths. One *Connector* mentioned both. When asked “What are the strengths of the *Connect* ministry?” she answered, “Face to face communication.”³⁹ Another wrote:

Getting to know more members of the congregation and their families. Feeling comfortable with those families asking for help with different things, inside and outside the church such as childcare. Having the children meet and get to know each other. Welcoming new members into a group so it’s easier for transitioning. When people are more involved in small groups they seem to feel more accountable. Problems that members have may come out more easily in small groups and therefore be acknowledged sooner.⁴⁰

A third wrote:

The main strength of the program is that it is a personal ministry. I feel a personal responsibility to reach out to the members of my group on a weekly basis. As a woman, I can connect on a personal level with the group in a maternal way using my communication abilities and members are comfortable responding back in the same way. As a connector I know now that something is happening to keep the congregation informed and working together.⁴¹

³⁹ Connect Evaluation from Karen Dickson

⁴⁰ Connect Evaluation from Deanna Ritenour

⁴¹ Connect Evaluation from Pat Brothers

One of the reasons the *Connectors* believe that communication has improved is the ability to communicate with members of the congregation in the way each member prefers. “Each Connector knows how to reach their members in an effective manner.”⁴²

Members who filled out the evaluation had similar comments when it came to the strengths of *Connect*. One simply said that the strengths of the *Connect* ministry are:

- A. Personal relationships among connectors
- B. Personal relationships among members of groups
- C. Better communication
- D. Better member involvement in service
- E. Better care of struggling souls⁴³

Another member wrote, “Communication is better and more people are participating from some groups.”⁴⁴ Specific types of communication were mentioned by some: “Prayer requests have helped tremendously in knowing who is in need of prayer and who we may want to reach out and help. Additionally, Connect groups help spread support for various church functions which greatly enhance participation throughout the church.”⁴⁵ Communication and relationships were again identified as strengths:

Better and more effective communication out from the church to its members. Quick response to needs of members when it is appropriate for the church membership to get involved. A smaller, more intimate group which makes it easier and more likely that participants can form relationships with other members. A smaller group of people for new members to assimilate with, perhaps not so intimidating as trying to assimilate with the entire congregation. The connect leaders are meeting regularly and often with the pastors to ensure the groups are staying within the original mission of the ministry. The pastors are aware of the needs of individual congregation members much quicker.⁴⁶

⁴² Connect Evaluation from Jennifer Fox

⁴³ Connect Evaluation from Joan Dretsch

⁴⁴ Connect Evaluation from Deb Moss

⁴⁵ Connect Evaluation from Judy Haugen

⁴⁶ Connect Evaluation from Sherry Liverman

Weaknesses

As with any ministry effort by the Church militant there are weaknesses in the *Connect* ministry. Not surprisingly, the weakness most often identified by the *Connectors* was a lack of participation by some of the members of the congregation. This weakness is particularly prevalent among members in their late teens and early twenties. “The younger members are still hard to organize in getting involved with different activities/service projects.”^{47 48}

Just one *Connector* identified weaknesses other than the need to improve communication and improve member involvement. Her list of weaknesses were:

Weak program guidelines, not tracking and/or publishing any results, nothing published in a newsletter or bulletin supporting the program, no contact between connectors and church leaders (other than with program director Pastor Roecker). The monthly meetings are not very beneficial.⁴⁹

Most of the weaknesses identified by this *Connector* are helpful in recognizing how the ministry can be improved. Other comments serve as a reminder that no ministry design will perfectly suit everyone serving in that ministry. For example, very organized people tend to make outstanding *Connectors*. This, though, makes them uncomfortable with the level of structure in *Connect*. For them, the intentional flexibility of *Connect* is a bit disconcerting. Also, personalities that thrive on an abundance of information find it difficult to understand why offering too much information to the congregation at large can result in members absorbing none of the information. Finding the right level of structure in the program and the right amount of information to communicate will continue to be challenges.

⁴⁷ Connect Evaluation from Jennifer Fox

⁴⁸ A primary reason for this is that many of Resurrection’s young people are second-generation members. While their parents relocated to the area while they were young adults and found their primary social network in the church, this generation grew up in the area and created a social network in their neighborhoods and schools. They aren’t looking to the church as a resource for friends. They already have friends outside of the church. So, it is difficult to convince them to become active in a *Connect* group.

⁴⁹ Connect Evaluation. Name withheld due to following personal comments.

Opportunities

When it came to identifying opportunities on which *Connect* has not yet capitalized, members did not have many suggestions. The suggestions they did proffer had to do with outreach and service to the community. “Even though we’ve talked about outreach, I don’t know if any group has initiated anything yet.”⁵⁰ Another wrote, “I think there will be more opportunities for the groups to connect to the community through different projects.”⁵¹

The *Connectors* were similarly less than forthcoming with suggested opportunities for *Connect*. Their comments tended to address what they perceive as a weakness in the connection between the congregational leaders and the members. For example, “Building trust between leadership and congregation is a huge opportunity to get everything else in place...I still get the impression there is an ‘us against them’ mentality.”⁵² This will be an issue for the leadership to pursue in the future. The lack of ideas for future opportunities may indicate the perception that the ministry is already addressing the areas it needs to address.

Threats

When identifying what might threaten the *Connect* ministry in the future, members mentioned the importance of continuing to have effective *Connectors*. “Shortage of more capable connectors and connector burn-out or discouragement in member participation,” were the threats identified by one member.⁵³ Also mentioned was the threat of assigning so many service projects to the groups that they begin to feel they are not free to develop their own ways of serving:

⁵⁰ Connect Evaluation from Joan Dretsch

⁵¹ Connect Evaluation from Deborah Moss

⁵² Connect Evaluation from Christine Wentzel

⁵³ Connect Evaluation from Joan Dretsch

Let me precede my concern by saying I am not feeling this way. Complacency and overworking on too many projects by your group would be a threat. For instance, a couple of group activities a year are fine to fit into a schedule or lifestyle. However, when the groups begin to be the head and not the mouth of the group it is easy to start to feel used instead of part of a family. I think this will certainly doom the program permanently...”⁵⁴

Connectors had similar concerns. Perhaps because they are responsible for so much, a number of *Connectors* believe the congregation needs to be careful not to overburden the groups. “Lack of ongoing leadership, member apathy, a church calendar with high number of activities that the connect groups are expected to complete or expecting connect groups to fulfill all church volunteer opportunities.”⁵⁵ “Too many events may discourage members.”⁵⁶ “Using this as a tool to ‘push’ our members to be more involved in service projects.”⁵⁷

The first six months of the *Connect* ministry have been truly blessed by the Lord. All of the groups have met multiple times and all have participated in at least one service project. More than one hundred members of Resurrection have participated in some way. Many others are interested but schedules did not allow them to attend a fellowship gathering yet. The *Connectors* have been a tremendous blessing. They are dedicated, persistent and energetic. Pastor Roecker meets with the *Connectors* on a monthly basis to receive an update on how things are going, answer questions and adjust the ministry as needed.

⁵⁴ Connect Evaluation from Linda McCausland

⁵⁵ Connect Evaluation from Karen Dickson

⁵⁶ Connect Evaluation from Deanna Ritenour

⁵⁷ Connect Evaluation from Jennifer Fox

Connect has positively impacted all three areas it was intended to address.

Communication

More people know more about what is happening. This can be attributed to two factors: more individualized modes of communication and more personal communication.⁵⁸ More members now know one another. Therefore, more information is being shared.

Service

No area of the congregation's life has been more impacted by *Connect* than service. Each *Connect* group is asked to carry out at least three service projects within the congregation and one service project to the community each year. To assist them, a list of congregational projects needing to be completed was compiled.⁵⁹ The groups then chose which they would like to carry out.⁶⁰ A record is kept of who is doing what and an updated list is regularly sent out to the *Connectors*.

One of the reasons this has worked so well is that the members of the groups are getting to know each other. This means it is easier to ask for volunteers (since the person leading the project knows whom to ask). It also means the members of the group feel a sense of responsibility to the other members of the group to help with the project they are working on.

⁵⁸ This can be illustrated by a conversation I had with Deanna Ritenaur, the *Connector* for a group of young parents. She has discovered that most of her group prefers to use text messaging (a form of communication many of our older members aren't even familiar with). She also informed me that one of the young mothers in her group had texted her that morning to let her know that her children were sick and would not be attending the children's Christmas Eve service practice that afternoon. Before *Connect* this young mother would not have known whom to contact in this circumstance. If anything, she would have contacted one of the pastors, both of whom have plenty of other things to do on a Sunday morning. So, *Connect* is improving communication both going out from congregational leaders and coming in to congregational leaders.

⁵⁹ See Appendix I.

⁶⁰ At the initial bible study/*Connect* introduction I presented in August, 2010 I was asked what would happen if none of the groups signed up for one of the congregational projects. Folks found it humorous and breathed a collective sigh of relief when I answered, "Then we don't do it." I explained that none of these projects was commanded in Scripture. Therefore, if the people of Resurrection aren't willing or interested in a particular project, it's OK not to do it. This seemed to be a revelation for many people who had spent years feeling burdened by ministries in which no one was interested yet many felt were mandatory.

Additionally, there is a sense of ownership of the project since the group chooses the project they will be carrying out. Also, the way the groups are organized means that for the most part long time members are in the same groups. This allows the new members to carry out their projects as they see fit rather than feeling pressured to do things “the way they’ve always been done.” Again, there is a sense of flexibility.⁶¹ Finally, every group is different with regard to their interests.⁶² For all of these reasons Resurrection has seen a significant number of members serving who had never served before.

In addition to the organized service projects being carried out, we are also much better equipped to serve individuals within the congregation. Because people are getting to know one another, they are getting to know one another’s needs. What someone would not be willing to share with the congregation as a whole, they are willing to share with the other members of their *Connect* group.⁶³

Another area of service members are excited about is the *Connect* groups’ service to the community. This is still in its infant stages but it has been wonderful to hear how excited the groups are to serve outside the church. Once again, flexibility has been a key. The groups are free to choose whatever project or projects they wish to undertake. The only request is that they run the idea past Pastor Roecker before carrying it out (in case there are community service

⁶¹ Some groups carry out a Lenten soup supper by asking each member of the group to bring a soup. Other groups (whose members are not retired and whose members all work outside the home so they do not have the time to cook during the day) choose to ask one of their members to purchase the soup pre-made and the rest reimburse him/her afterward.

⁶² Some groups want nothing to do with serving dinners but are thrilled to take care of the flowerbeds outside the church. Others are not physically able to help with the flowerbeds but love nothing better than to serve a Lenten supper.

⁶³ Some examples: an elderly member had a broken furnace. Through her *Connect* group, a member was found who could repair it. In another case, a family of four was in financial straits after both spouses lost their jobs. The *Connector* organized a freewill offering to help. There have been many instances where members with life challenges have been counseled and encouraged by other members of their *Connect* group. New members, in particular, are becoming involved in service far sooner than they have in the past.

groups with whom we would not be able to participate on the grounds of biblical fellowship principles).⁶⁴

Care of Struggling Souls

As with the other two areas, the care of struggling souls continues to be a work in progress. A number of members who had not been active in months have come back to worship as a result of efforts from our *Connectors*. In addition, a number of non-member spouses have attended *Connect* gatherings. God willing, this will lead them to closer relationships within the congregation and a closer relationship with the Lord.

One of the aspects of soul care needing further development is the relationship between the *Connectors* and the congregation's elders. When should the *Connectors* address a situation and when should the elders become involved? Pastor Fischer (who is primarily responsible for ministry to the straying) attended a *Connector* meeting early in 2011. He discussed these important issues and formulated a plan of cooperation and communication between the *Connectors* and the elders. Again, flexibility was maintained as it was agreed that much of the work would need to be carried out on a case-by-case basis.

Recommendations

Christians serve a God who does not change.⁶⁵ Christians trust in God's Word, which does not change.⁶⁶ Christians labor in a harvest field that *does* change. And so Christians will strive to be faithful stewards of the resources their gracious Lord provides so that his will might be done and his kingdom come. Christian congregations will carefully evaluate the

⁶⁴ Some of the ideas already being pursued by our groups include hosting a blood drive, reading to the elderly at nursing homes, and an environmental cleanup effort which strives to keep the Chesapeake Bay clean.

⁶⁵ Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17

⁶⁶ Isaiah 40:8

circumstances in and around them so they may preach the Word and administer the sacraments with as few impediments as possible. To fail to evaluate a Christian congregation's circumstances is to be unfaithful stewards.

This does not mean that every congregation will need to make major adjustments to their ministry. What they are currently doing might very well be the best way to do it. However, Christian leaders ought not assume this. When worship attendance or bible class participation or Christian service are showing signs of weakness it is easy to assume that members are simply allowing their sinful nature to get the best of them. In many cases this may be true. As was mentioned in the introduction, the evil three are always active in the lives of a congregation's members. But, a congregation ought not make that axis of evil's job easier. If a congregation were to hold its weekly worship service on Sunday at 3:00 a.m., for example, who would argue that the only reason for the lackluster attendance is members' sinful natures? Who would claim, "They just don't love Jesus enough?" Would it not be more responsible to evaluate whether the service time might be unreasonable?

It is obvious to most that a 3:00 a.m. worship time would put an unnecessary barrier in the way of a Christian keeping the Third Commandment. Is it any less obvious that expecting a new member to create relationships with four hundred strangers puts an unnecessary barrier in the way of a Christian keeping Jesus' command to love one another?⁶⁷ One way or another, it is critical for congregations to intentionally create relationships among members so that they can unleash their love for one another.

⁶⁷ Prior to *Connect*, I used to say, half-jokingly, that Resurrection's plan for assimilating new members was to get them through our new member class, confirm them, and then hope they were outgoing people.

Resurrection chose to use a small group ministry – a model that might very well prove to be a blessing for many congregations. Should a congregation choose such a model, perhaps the following recommendations based on Resurrection’s experience will prove helpful.

Prepare the Congregation

Congregations are families. Families have traditions, ways of doing things. When those traditions are changed it can be disconcerting for members of the family. It is unwise and unloving to thrust change onto a family without first explaining why the change is happening and what the change will mean for those involved. Adequate time must be taken to warm members to the idea. Feedback must be gathered. If possible, bring in an objective outside source to gather input from members about the new ministry. Members tend to be more open with an outsider than they are with their pastor or church leaders because they don’t feel they need to spare anyone’s feelings. Regardless of the form the it takes, preparing the congregation is critical. If care is not taken to prepare the congregation, participation will likely not be strong and the ministry will likely fail to flourish.

Identify the Goals and Stick with Them

Anyone who has ever been pheasant hunting can tell you the importance of picking a target and staying with it. When a group of birds is flushed out of the brush, the worst thing a hunter can do is try to aim at all of them. He will end up shooting none of them. The same is true of a small group ministry. It is tempting to try to make the ministry do everything. The result may be that the ministry will do nothing. As the *Connect* ministry was developed and implemented, numerous ideas were suggested for how the ministry could be used. Could the groups consist of mixed ages, for example, to serve as a kind of mentoring program? Should the

ministry provide an avenue for bible study? Etc. The challenge is that every idea is a good idea. Rarely does someone propose an unchristian or unloving idea for a congregation's ministry. However, every time a congregation says, "yes" to one idea, it is saying, "no" to another idea. Or, even worse, it is saying, "yes" to every ministry and resources are spread so thinly that none of the ministries is very well at all. A congregation needs to give a great deal of thought to precisely what it is hoping to accomplish with its small group ministry. Is it strengthening an area of ministry that is weak? Is it building on an area of ministry that is already strong? Whatever the case, choosing goals carefully and sticking with them is important.

Bible Study is Optional

Perhaps the aspect of *Connect* that surprises people the most is that it does not contain a bible study component. Some people who have shared their thoughts with the author have come very close to insisting that a small group ministry *must* have a bible study component. It doesn't. Is bible study important? Of course. Is the Word critical to the health of Christians and a Christian congregation? Unquestionably.⁶⁸ Does this mean that we must conduct a formal bible study at every Christian gathering? Absolutely not. Do congregations hold a formal bible study before getting their hands dirty on a church workday? Is there a formal bible study when members gather for a day of fun at an amusement park or go to a ball game? Does the church picnic begin with an hour-long study of Scripture? Probably not. The point is not that bible study is unimportant but that congregations spend their time together in a variety of ways just as a Christian family spends its time together in a variety of ways. It is important for a Christian family to spend time holding family devotions. But, they probably won't hold those devotions on the soccer field on Saturday morning.

⁶⁸ See the Introduction to this thesis.

“But how could it possibly *harm* a small group ministry to have a bible study component to them?” There are a couple of ways. First, having a bible study component necessitates having qualified bible study leaders. Qualified bible study leaders are not easy to come by in many congregations. Training new bible study leaders is a sizeable task. This, of course, does not mean a congregation may not have qualified bible study leaders or that it is not worth the effort of training new leaders. It does mean that a congregation needs to think this through carefully before making bible study a key component of its small groups ministry. If bible study is not a primary goal of a congregation’s small groups then why take the chance of derailing the entire ministry because of a shortage of qualified bible study leaders?

The second way a bible study component could harm a small group ministry is that it might limit the fellowship options available to the groups. Resurrection’s small groups often meet for fellowship on Sundays after worship. They have a cookout at a park, go bowling, etc. If bible study were a required component of their gatherings, they would be asked to attend Sunday morning bible class, then worship, and then a small group bible study. Most would simply stop scheduling their gatherings for Sunday afternoons. This would weaken the fellowship component of their groups because many of their members come from a distance and Sunday after worship is the most convenient time for them to gather.

It might also be wise to keep in mind that a formal bible study is not the only way Christians share God’s Word with one another. As Christians fellowship and get to know one another they begin to share their hopes, dreams, hurts and challenges with each other. Their brothers and sisters then have the opportunity to give them encouragement from God’s Word and provide examples from their own lives when particular truths of God’s Word was helpful to them. This, too, is a way of unleashing to power of the Word among God’s people.

It should be emphasized once again that every situation will be different and in many cases a bible study component will fit quite nicely into a congregation's small group design. Congregations should be sure, however, that it is there by *design*, not *default*.

Be Flexible

Having a flexible structure is also a key concept for a small group ministry in Twenty-First Century America. There is a tremendous diversity in the way people live their lives. There are retirees, single young adults, newlyweds, new parents, homes with two income earners, homes with stay at home parents, and many more. Expecting such a diverse group of people to be able to be active in the same way is unreasonable. Therefore, the ministry must have enough structure to make the coordinators comfortable but flexible enough to adjust to each coordinator/group's unique circumstances. The person responsible for the ministry must be genuinely interested in inviting and listening to the input of the coordinators. Many of the best ideas in *Connect* came from the coordinators and were often the opposite of what the author thought should be done.

Train and Support the Coordinators

Ongoing training and support is also important, particularly for the coordinators. Those who are brave enough to embark on a new ministry must be given the support they need to be confident of what they are doing. We live in an imperfect world. Things will not always go smoothly. The initial enthusiasm of the coordinators will be dampened when they run head first into members who are not nearly as enthusiastic. Holding regular meetings with the coordinators

is an important cog in the *Connect* wheel. These meetings need to be pointed and productive.⁶⁹

In Resurrection's case, in order to provide support during the challenging early months, as much as forty-five minutes of each one hour monthly meeting was spent allowing the coordinators to share their joys and frustrations. This allowed the coordinators to realize they were not alone and also give one another ideas for addressing their challenges.

Encourage Cross Pollenization

As was mentioned by those who evaluated *Connect*, there are threats to this ministry just as there are to any ministry. The danger of developing cliques within the congregation is a real and present danger. This, though, is a danger in every congregation because every congregation has sub groups of members with similar interests or personalities. In order to minimize this danger Resurrection encourages members to participate in congregation-wide events, especially bible classes, but also dinners, the church picnic, or congregational outings. *Connectors* are also encouraged to team with one or two other *Connect* groups for some projects so that they serve alongside a broader range of members.

Provide Sufficient Logistical Support

Organizing and maintaining a four hundred person volunteer organization is a daunting task. If a congregation chooses to use a small group ministry to organize their volunteers then it is critical that adequate logistical support is provided. Service opportunities must be coordinated and updated, information must be communicated with the coordinators, lists of names in each group need to be regularly updated, new members must be added to existing groups. All of these tasks take time and require attention. Currently, Resurrection is meeting this need through the

⁶⁹ Resurrection's coordinators were asked how long they wanted each meeting to last. They said one hour. Therefore, the meetings have been strictly kept to one hour. If there are items on the agenda that haven't been discussed, they are tabled.

efforts of a very gifted and dedicated volunteer who assists Pastor Roecker. Ideally, the congregation will eventually meet the need with a paid staff position.

A Future in God's Hands

As the *Connect* ministry moves ahead, it will no doubt develop and, Lord willing, improve as it learns from its own experiences. In all that Resurrection does and in all the ways she does it, her members will find comfort and courage at all times from St. Paul's reminder to the Ephesians:

¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. ⁷⁰

Soli Deo Gloria

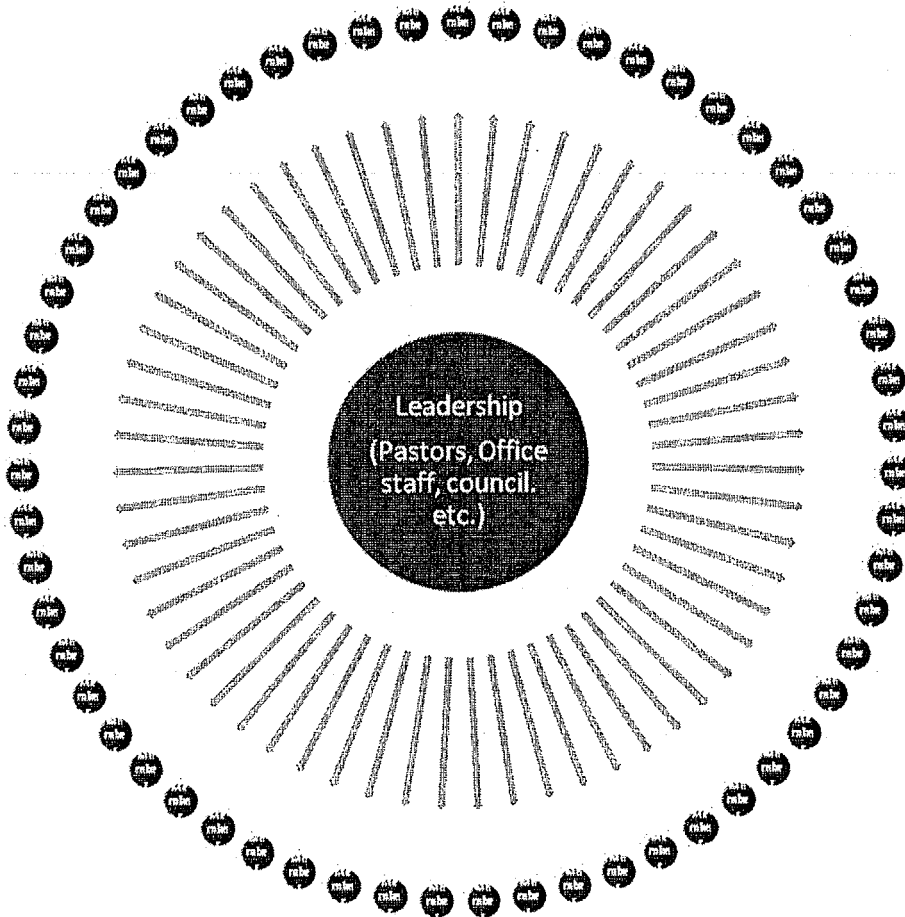
Rev. Eric Roecker
Tuesday of the First Week of Lent, 2011
Chesapeake, Virginia

⁷⁰Ephesians 1:17-22. *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

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Current Ministry Model



CONNECT Groups Ministry Model



Appendix B – Report from Pastor Mark Birkholz

CONNECT Ministry Model Group Discussions Resurrection Lutheran Church March 5th and 6th, 2010

Reality.....As is the case with many mid-sized and growing congregations, Resurrection faces issues of retaining past levels of member participation, mutual encouragement, communication and leadership development.

Purpose.....Lay and called leaders alike thought it wise to seek input from members regarding a proposed solution for some of the issues listed above. Listening groups seemed like a viable and useful step in this process.

Participants....I met with your congregational chairman on Friday evening; with your two pastors later that same evening; and with approximately 40 members during four listening sessions of 90 minutes each on Saturday. The 40 members who participated were a nice cross section of young and old; male and female; long time members and relative new comers.

Agenda.....I followed the same general format in facilitating the discussions on Saturday. We typically covered the first eight items in 50 minutes or less. About 40 minutes was then devoted to discussing whether "Connect" would address current and future concerns.

- 1) Opening prayer and becoming familiar with the background of each participant
- 2) My role as a mission counselor and the purpose of our listening sessions
- 3) Sharing a brief history, current trends/programs, and some statistics pertaining to Resurrection
- 4) Asking the participants to weigh in on perceived strengths, weaknesses, solutions and Ten Year Vision
- 5) Explaining some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in mid-sized congregational life
- 6) Pointing out that participation, familiarity, and worship average tend to wane at this juncture
- 7) Five (maybe, six) signs of healthy church membership
- 8) Current polity/structure at Resurrection
- 9) Explaining the Connect Ministry Model and its general goals

I consider it significant that there were no strongly dissenting voices---all who attended the listening sessions were agreed that while Resurrection was in "good shape" currently, there were issues of participation, leadership, communication and soul care that needed to be addressed. What follows are generalizations of the most frequent comments (good and bad) participants shared in analyzing this congregation.

Positively

- 1) The adult level studies (Life with Jesus, Sunday classes, Midweek) are a congregational strength
- 2) An older generation of leaders is willing to turn over the "reigns" to a younger crowd
- 3) "Wednesdays with the Word" has been a very workable tool for study, growth and fellowship
- 4) Communication has been good due to consistency and variety of formats
- 5) Both content and variety in worship format/preaching is very much appreciated by the members

Negatively

- 1) Members feel as though they are a "welcoming" group but aren't integrating new members very well
- 2) They frequently mentioned their struggles with melodies (particularly hymns) that are unfamiliar
- 3) Most acknowledged that newer members aren't willing to participate in the current structure/polity
- 4) Resurrection is struggling with programs for teens/young adults and service by those same groups
- 5) The open forums are much appreciated. Most felt that attendance would be better if the forums were held during the normal B. Class/Sunday School time slot on Sunday mornings.

What follows are some the reactions regarding the specific proposals for the Connect Ministry Model.

Size.....The general consensus was that 20 family "units" per group would be about right

Frequency... Without conducting a formal poll, most of the participants thought that meeting six times per year would be advisable. Some of your more currently active members favored less frequent---perhaps quarterly---gatherings. A small minority of those who spoke up wondered if the groups shouldn't meet monthly. When I asked for their rationale those members seemed to be basing their views on experiences in a small group Bible study model.

Setting.....This was the biggest roadblock, especially for some of the ladies. They expressed concerns about getting such a large group (25+ adults plus children) into the typical home. And they were skeptical about accomplishing much in the setting of a restaurant.

Make Up.....Some felt that the Connect groups could be formed along the lines of existing groups such as the "Over 50 Crowd" or "The Dirty Dozen". They'd favor putting those with common geography (in relation to the church property) or common life stages (married with children as an example) into groups. A slightly larger percentage, and again this is a generalization since I did no formal surveying/polling, felt that the groups should have more of a "blended" make up.

As regards the three specific goals of Connect Ministry Model:

Communication...Almost all readily understood the need for this component and that this format would not replace the current forms of Sunday announcements, bi-weekly newsletter, etc.

Service.....This is the area that most intrigues me and, I'd like to think, will have the greatest impact on your congregation as a whole. So I spent some time giving participants examples of how this might include finding individual talents or interests; identifying some tasks that the group will take on; identifying other tasks that the group can organize for full congregational participation; taking the group's activity outside of congregational life in order to do some community-based service projects. I think that most of the participants "get it". But this will need to be something that's carefully explained to your Connect leaders.

Soul Care.....There were a few who raised concerns that this might become too much of a cliquish "prayer chain" or "phone tree" or "gossip grapevine". But most thought of this as being a useful format for expressing Christian concern and accountability. Some expressed the hope that this could include at least a devotion or brief Bible study.

Some general reminders or encouragements from the participants:

- 1) Train the "connectors" very well and make sure they have the time to put into this effort
- 2) Keep this simple---one hour gatherings, perhaps with some food but not a pot luck format
- 3) Remember to incorporate the elderly, shut ins, and teens in the life of the groups
- 4) Tweak the format if some groups don't function well or if the overall system has a flaw
- 5) Change the make up of the groups periodically. Some thought annually, some thought every few years.

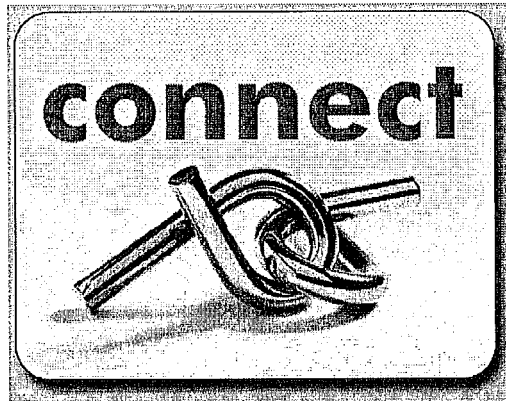
Being in your midst was a privilege. I'm grateful for the opportunity. And I pray that this approach brings about the desired blessings. Please stay in touch as you implement the approach. I'd like to share your ideas and experiences with other congregations who face the same challenges.

M. Birkholz, mission counselor

CONNECT

From idea to implementation

1. Divide congregation into CONNECT groups
2. Identify Connector for each group
3. Develop training materials for Connectors
4. Meet with Connectors to explain rationale and responsibilities
5. Develop plan for introducing CONNECT to the membership
6. Carry out plan for introducing CONNECT to the membership



Purpose

The goal of CONNECT groups is to foster personal relationships between members that will allow us to more effectively care for and communicate with one another.

Goals

1. Communication

The leaders of the groups (CONNECTORS) will be an important conduit for communication between the members of their groups and the leadership of Resurrection.

2. Service

Some service projects will be directly planned and carried out by individual CONNECT groups (e.g. each CONNECT group may be assigned one pot luck per year). Other areas of service will be coordinated by church staff or congregational leaders (e.g. the maintenance coordinator may need some plumbing work done). These leaders will use the Connectors as a resource to recruit volunteers to serve. (e.g. The maintenance coordinator may ask all of the Connectors if anyone in their CONNECT group has plumbing experience.)

3. Soul care

Soul care will be improved by making use of the relationships created within the CONNECT groups. These relationships will help us identify troubled souls and provide avenues to bring love and God's Word to them.

CONNECT Group Members

CONNECT groups will be organized based on members' life stage (single, parents with young children, empty nesters, etc.) and areas of interest. The church staff will strive to place each family unit in the CONNECT group that best fits the family. CONNECT groups will normally be comprised of 10-20 family units.

CONNECT Group Responsibilities

1. Meet as a group for fellowship at least 6 times per year
2. Coordinate 1-3 assigned service projects per year (e.g. Reformation Pot Luck, Christmas Decorating, etc.)
3. Create and carry out at least one service project for the community each year.
4. Love and serve one another within the CONNECT Group

CONNECTORS

CONNECTORS are the most important cog in the CONNECT groups wheel. Those called to serve as CONNECTORS will have the following gifts/skills:

1. Be spiritually mature members of Resurrection
2. Be responsible individuals who can be counted on to follow through on tasks required of them
3. Have organizational and relational skills necessary to the position

Responsibilities of CONNECTORS will include:

1. Attend regular training provided by the pastors (no more than 1 meeting/month)
2. Be in consistent communication with the church staff
3. See that regular fellowship activities occur for the group (at least 6 per year)
4. See that service projects assigned to the group are carried out
5. Communicate information from the church staff and leadership to appropriate members of the group
6. Meet with new members added to the group to begin building a relationship and present/discuss new member information
7. Be proactive in ministering to any members of the group who stray

Note: Not all of these responsibilities need to be directly carried out by the CONNECTOR. The CONNECTOR is simply responsible for making sure they are all being carried out. Each CONNECTOR is free to delegate responsibilities as he/she sees fit.

CONNECT Group Supervision

Supervision of the CONNECT groups will be the responsibility of the pastors with Pastor Roecker serving as the primary organizer, trainer and point of contact.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How are the groups organized?

A: The groups are organized according to life stage. Every effort is made to place people of similar age and interest in each group.

Q: Can I request to be part of a particular group?

A: Yes. Initially, all members are placed in a suggested group. If you find that you would prefer a different group, no problem!

Q: Where do the groups meet for fellowship?

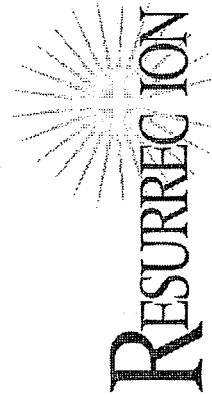
A: Wherever they choose! Each group is free to meet wherever and whenever best works for them.

Q: Whom should I ask if I have questions?

A: Speak with Pastor Roecker.



Connecting God's people



LUTHERAN CHURCH

WHAT is *connect*?

connect is the small groups ministry of RELC. Its goals are to encourage and improve:

1. COMMUNICATION between church members and church leaders
2. SERVICE by utilizing relationships fostered in connect groups
3. SOUL CARE by creating more intimate relationships so that members can more effectively love one another

WHO is *connect* for?

Every member of RELC is part of a *connect* group.

HOW do I sign up?

If you are a member of RELC you are already signed up.



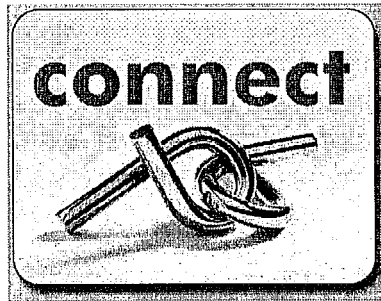
Connectors

Each *connect* group is served by a connector. The connector is the communication connection between the church leadership and the members of his/her *connect* group. The connector also makes sure fellowship events, service projects and soul care are carried out.

Activities

1. Each *connect* group meets at least six times per year for fellowship. These events help build relationships between members of the group. They are also an opportunity to start relationships with new members of Resurrection.
2. Each *connect* group carries out service projects at RELC. These projects might consist of organizing a pot luck dinner, hosting the congregational Christmas party or any of a number of other services.
3. Each *connect* group carries out at least one service project for our community each year.





Complete this sentence: “My service as a CONNECTOR is important because...”

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

1. What assignment has Jesus given His Church?
2. What tools has Jesus given His Church to carry out this assignment?
3. What encouragement/comfort does Jesus give His Church as she carries out her assignment?
4. Why is it so important to remember the answers to #s 2 and 3?

Acts 6:1-7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

1. Why was the ministry of the seven so important?

2. What was the result of this new ministry?

3. How will the CONNECT groups indirectly carry out the mission Jesus gave His Church in Matthew 28?

Hebrews 10:24,25

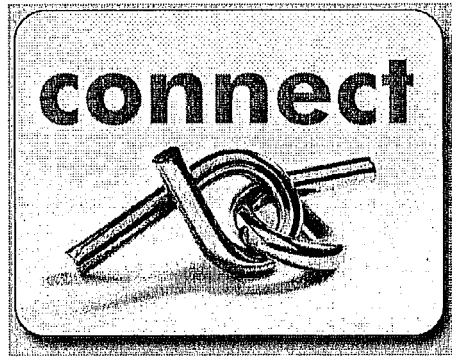
²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

How will improving the following areas help the members of RELC carry out this command from God?

- Communication

- Service

- Soul Care



Connectors' Initial Meeting

October 14, 2010

I. What you are looking for

II. What is this all about?

III. Communication

1) With Pastor and Joan

2) With the members of your group

IV. Getting the groups started

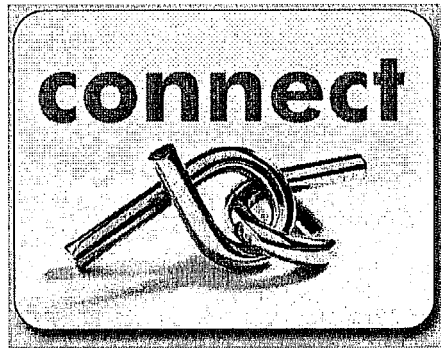
V. Your CONNECT group

VI. Service opportunities

VII. Monthly meeting time

VIII. Set up time to meet with Pastor Roecker

IX. Questions that need answering



Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Christians need encouragement. We live in a sin-filled world. Our spiritual enemies are powerful and persistent. And, every one of us has a sinful nature that seeks to lead us away from God. One of the reasons God gives us to one another is for mutual encouragement. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (10:24,25).

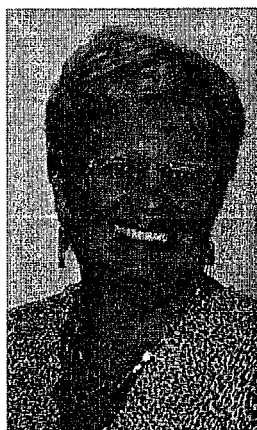
This is why we are beginning a new ministry at Resurrection called *CONNECT*. Our prayer is that *CONNECT* will help our people communicate, serve and care for one another more effectively. Every member of Resurrection will be part of a *CONNECT* group. Each group will be served by a *CONNECTOR* who will coordinate the activities of the group. The members of your group are listed on the back side of this page. You will also find a welcome from your *CONNECTOR*.

Your *CONNECTOR* will contact you in the near future to introduce herself and to let you know how and when your group will begin getting to know one another and serve with one another. If you have questions about *CONNECT* please contact me.

In Christian service,
Pastor Roecker
581-4841
eroecker@builtonjesus.org

Connector – Pat Brothers

Jane Ackerman
John & Becky Bender
Heidi Braade
Bill & Pat Brothers
Bob Buss
Dave & Joline Finke
John & Toni Green
Larry Hefflefinger
Johnny Helton
Dave Ignatowicz
Bonnie Larson
Joyce LeTourneau
Julia Roebuck
Alice Schultz
John & Toni Sheppard
Frances Skinner
Debbie Stallings
Ralph and LaVerne Uransky
Ann Williamson
Beth Yorgen



Pat Brothers is a lifelong WELS member and has been at RELC for 25 years. The US Navy brought her family here and they stayed. Pat has 3 adult children and 5 grandchildren. She and Bill have been married 26 years. You can reach Pat in the following ways:

Home phone: 495-6363
E-mail: PKBros@aol.com
Cell phone: 409-3229

Appendix H – Survey emailed to members and *Connectors*

Good afternoon sisters,

I have three reasons for emailing you:

1. I want to thank you all for everything you have done and are doing for our Connect ministry. I thank God for you and pray for you regularly. Without you this ministry would not be possible and I do not take you for granted!
2. I would like to remind you that we are scheduled to meet next Thursday evening at 7pm. Hope y'all can make it!
3. I would like to ask for your help. As I think you know, the Connect ministry is the subject of the thesis I've written as the final step in earning a Masters of Pastoral Theology degree from our seminary. My advisors from the seminary have informed me that they would like for me to have a more thorough analysis of how effective the ministry is. So, I would like to get some feedback from you. I don't think it should take too long or too much effort. Below are a few questions I'd like you to answer. You can either send a separate e-mail or just reply to mine and fill in your answers under each question. Here they are:

EVALUATION OF CONNECT GOALS

1. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **congregational communication** was *without* Connect groups:
2. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **congregational communication** was *with* Connect groups:
3. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **member service** (member participation in service activities) was *without* Connect groups:
4. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **member service** was *with* Connect groups:
5. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **Care for Struggling Souls** (straying members or members with life challenges who need help) was *without* Connect groups:

Appendix G

6. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) rate how effective **Care for Struggling Souls** (straying members or members with life challenges who need help) was *with* Connect groups:

S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

1. What are the **Strengths** of the Connect ministry?
2. What are the **Weaknesses** of the Connect ministry?
3. What are the **Opportunities** of the Connect ministry? (Are there opportunities this ministry could capitalize on that it currently isn't?)
4. What are the **Threats** to the Connect ministry? (What, if anything, would cause this ministry to fail or fail to be as effective as it should be?)

That's it. Write as much as you would like to answer the four S.W.O.T. questions. The more input you share with me the better handle we will have on how things are going.

One more thing: If you would like to distribute these questions to any of the members of your group that would be great. The more feedback the better. They should probably be people who are actually involved in the ministry though. I wouldn't suggest mass e-mailing it to your whole group. Also, please be sure they identify themselves so I can follow up with them if necessary.

Thank you again for all your service to our Savior's Kingdom. And thank you for taking the time to help me and the Connect ministry by sharing your thoughts.

God Bless,

Pastor Roecker

Pastor Eric Roecker
Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
Chesapeake, VA 23322
757-581-4841
eroecker@buitonjesus.org

CONNECT Service Opportunities

March – August 2010

Lenten and Maundy Thursday Suppers

March 9
March 16\
March 23
March 30
April 6
April 13
April 21

College Students Outreach

Coordinate visiting college students' visit (housing, transportation, food)
Coordinate canvassing and other tasks for visiting college students

Pot-luck with Information Meeting

April 10

Easter Egg Hunt

Easter Sunday (April 24) and/or a Saturday before Easter

Chesapeake Jubilee Booth

A weekend in May – dates to be announced

Spring Festival

Date to be determined

Church Picnic

June 5

Pot-luck with Information Meeting

June 12

VBS/Sports Camp

Dates to be announced

Fall Kickoff Sunday

September (first Sunday after Labor Day)

Appendix I – List of Service Projects

Church and Yard Work Day: ALL GROUPS

Date to be announced

Flower Bed Maintenance: ALL GROUPS

Ongoing