



June 24, 2018

Dear Southwood Family and Friends,

I've had the privilege over the past few months to pray and talk with elders and members on our Strategic Planning Team about how God might use Southwood for the sake of his kingdom in Huntsville and beyond. Our heart continues to be that God has placed us here so that as the grace of Jesus transforms us, it would also transform our neighbors and our community, both desperately in need of the gospel as we are. Two immediate areas of opportunity we have identified are 1) growth in true community - being the family of God connected in meaningful relationships and 2) growth in true discipleship - being the body of Christ together seeing God's Word impact every area of our lives for his kingdom. These two opportunities are directly connected to each other because following Jesus sacrificially, reaching our neighbors for Jesus, or transforming a city - all things we MUST be prayerfully pursuing as disciples of Jesus - cannot be done alone. We need each other!

As we seek to prioritize this community and discipleship on Sunday mornings, we decided to structure Sunday School classes differently. Calling them "Connect Communities" is an effort to describe their purpose - connecting people to each other and connecting God's Word to our lives in community. These communities are grouped generally by age to facilitate those initial connections most easily, and they will also seek to continue engaging us in the inter-generational community that is one of my favorite aspects of the Southwood Family. These communities will be only a piece of community-fueled discipleship and will help connect their members to smaller groups and other environments for more intimate community and more intensive equipping. At the same time, they will provide a broader network of relationships within the family and a great context for discussing God's Word and its application to our lives together.

In order to facilitate this as effectively as possible, we have also decided to switch the order of corporate worship and Sunday School beginning this fall. The worship service will begin at 9:30, followed by the Connect Hour for all ages from 11:00-12:00. While continuing to maintain the high priority of worship, we believe this switch will help more of our people engage in the Connect Communities themselves and have natural avenues to welcome new people from a worship service directly into relationships. In addition to engaging more adults, we hope this switch will encourage more families to take advantage of this time designed specifically for our children and youth, whose spiritual nurture is such a great privilege and responsibility in our church family.

So, there are many great ways for our adults to remain engaged following the worship service. Participating in a Connect Community is a great way to engage with old and new friends. Serving in a Sunday School class upstairs or at the Lodge offers rich opportunities to impact the next generation. Volunteering in the nursery allows you to help in some of our fullest rooms each Sunday. Praying on your own or with others in the Prayer Room is perhaps the most necessary portion of all we do because it is God's work, not ours, to build relationships, disciples, and his kingdom. I'd encourage you to pray about how God might use you and your family on Sundays this fall as we seek to be his family on his mission.

Christy, our girls, and I have benefited from being a part of the Southwood Family for nearly 10 years now, and we hope never to leave. It's the kind of family that desires to grow in its trust of God together, that longs to care for every hurting member, that loves to welcome neighbors into the family, and that has learned to admit its own shortcomings. It's the kind of family I believe God has placed in Huntsville to impact many others in our community who need the forgiving, welcoming, caring community we have enjoyed. God has been teaching us in the Gospel of Luke as Jesus heads toward the cross for the sake of his enemies, that we must trust our King and follow him in sacrificially moving toward the needy and outsiders - whether those hurting people are in our pews at church, in our office at work, or in our classroom at school. As we experience the grace of Jesus moving tangibly toward us, we realize He has placed us in the lives of our neighbors to express that grace tangibly toward them - that they may taste the joy of our gracious Savior. That's what it means to be disciples of Jesus on kingdom mission in gospel community. May we never settle for anything less than lives and a church shaped by that gracious calling!

One last thought: I really don't like change. So I understand that for some of you who are like me, this change will present some discomfort or frustration. Please know that your staff and elders would be delighted to listen and process questions and concerns you have - whether your question is answered on the next page of this letter or not! When things are changing around us, it often helps me to remember things that are staying the same. In this case, there's a lot of comfort to be found there. Southwood's mission and vision are the same, and our core commitments are unchanged. Most importantly, Jesus remains the same. He is our Good Shepherd and will continue to lead his Church as we advance against the gates of hell. Focusing together on our Savior and King is the best way to stay connected to each other and to see the good news of the gospel impact the precious people around us every day. May God continue to overwhelm us with his grace!

For Christ and his kingdom,



Will Spink
Senior Pastor

- **When** will these changes be implemented?

The first Sunday with Connect Communities and the new schedule (9:30 Worship, 11:00-12:00 Connect Hour) will be Sunday, September 9, the week after Labor Day.

- **Where** will the Connect Communities meet on Sunday morning?

The four groups will meet in the current Adult Sunday School hallway (across from nursery). One room remains open for a Welcome to Southwood class or other meeting.

- **How** will the **time** be used in the Connect Communities?

The plan is for the hour from 11:00-12:00 on Sunday mornings to be approximately 15 minutes of relational connection/fellowship (including food/drink!), 15 minutes of announcements/communication, and 30 minutes of teaching/discussion.

- **Will the Connect Communities ever meet outside of Sunday mornings?**

Yes, a few times each year. These social and/or service gatherings will provide further connection and help include in the community both friends not at church on Sundays and Southwood members who serve in other areas during the Connect Hour.

- **How** will I figure out which of the four **Connect Communities** to participate in?

The communities will be generally grouped by age (20-30, 30-45, 45-60, and 60+).

These will not, however, be strictly enforced, and the intent is for you to find a group where you best connect. We understand that season of life, age of children, and how old you feel rather than how old you are ☺ will be significant factors.

- **Why** are there only four **Connect Communities**, and could you describe the make-up of each?

We are seeking to create communities with a range of life experience within general age ranges rather than being so narrow that everyone in your community looks just the same. Demographics would tell us that at Southwood you would find in each group:

20-30: College students, single adults, & newlywed couples – some with a kid or two

30-45: Single adults and couples – some with kids (many in elem/middle school)

45-60: Single adults and couples – some with kids (many in high school or adults)

60+: Single adults and couples – many with grown kids and/or grandkids

- **Who** will **lead** the Connect Communities?

Each community will have a team of men and women coordinating the group. In addition to other church members, each leadership team will have two elders committed to focus on shepherding among the members of the community.

- **Whom** do I **contact** about being involved in the Connect Communities?

You can show up following the worship service September 9 or any Sunday thereafter (no sign-up required) or contact Pastor Ron (ron.clegg@southwood.org) for questions.

- **Is this** a move away from **inter-generational relationships** in our church family?

No. These relationships across generations are not only a significant part of the biblical picture of the family of God but also one of the greatest gifts God has given Southwood. We will continue to enjoy such relationships in small groups, men's and women's ministry, and other settings. In addition, while age is often helpful in initial connections for new people, creative and intentional opportunities are being designed to provide opportunities for each Connect Community to relate with the other communities.

- *Is this a move away from teaching and studying **God's Word** in Sunday School?*

No. We believe God's Word is absolutely vital to healthy members and communities in the body of Christ. Part of the idea in "Connect" Communities is connecting God's Word to our lives as well as connecting to each other. While there may be a shorter time for teaching each week, this aspect is still vital to being a Christ-centered church family.

- *What will the "**teaching**" element of the Connect Communities look like?*

The relationships being developed in communities provide a great context to talk together about where God's Word connects in our lives. At times, this will look like facilitated discussion of application questions from the sermon we just heard so we can apply God's Word in community. Other times there will be a teacher for one week or several weeks at a time who addresses new material (Book of Revelation, Parenting, Sharing Your Faith with Friends, etc.) in an engaging, discussion-oriented manner.

- *What impact will this have on the **youth and children's** Sunday School?*

Both our children's and youth teams are working to make this time engaging and excellent. In fact, a significant part of our heart in this plan is to encourage and enable more young people to participate in these times designed specifically for them, which means there will be even more opportunities to serve our kids and youth in these environments. But the current classes, age groupings, and basic structure will continue in the new system. We are sensitive to the need for food to be an element in all classes and will work with parents on the best ways for us to handle these needs.

- *How do these Connect Communities fit into Southwood's overall **discipleship plan**?*

Gospel-centered relationships are vital to biblical discipleship, the experience and expression of grace at the heart of Southwood's mission. Connect Communities are designed as places of relational inclusion beyond the worship service. They also begin building disciples around God's Word impacting all of life. More intense equipping and more intimate relationship will still develop in small group contexts, which will also flow out of these communities.

- *Do I remain in my **small group** when I start participating in a Connect Community?*

Yes! These gatherings are designed to play significant but different roles in your discipleship. Connect Communities will be a tangible expression on Sunday mornings of our relational priority, but they won't replace the more intimate community of mixed-gender and gender-based small groups or the more intensive equipping and training found in other contexts. While there may be seasons where you find yourself regularly in both groups and seasons where one or the other fits best, investing in relationships where you know and are known remains vital in our discipleship.

- *Whom do I approach with **comments, questions, or concerns**?*

All positive comments and edible thank-you gifts go to Pastor Will ☺! Seriously, one of the primary reasons we are communicating in June about plans for September is to give time for processing and feedback. The elders would very much like to hear from you. You can come in person this Sunday, July 1, 9:00-10:00 in Classroom E to talk with elders, or you can e-mail all the elders at elders@southwood.org.