



The theme of this OakLeaf is “Small Groups” one of East White Oak’s Pathways of Discipleship. Our three “Pathways” (Sunday Worship, Bible Fellowships, and Small Groups) each make unique contributions to the process of transforming people into worshipers who are maturing in Christ.



# Small Groups: Real Relationships in our Messy Lives

by Pastor Justin Waples

**East White Oak is committed to Sunday Worship, Bible Fellowships, and Small Groups as our Pathways of Discipleship. One of my goals and great joys at East White Oak is to guide, equip, and oversee Small Groups!**

As a church, we genuinely want to see each person be part of a “Small Group”—a church-organized ministry with less than 20 people in size.

One person asked, “I am in a Women’s Small Group Bible Study... should I join a Traditional Small Group as well?” It’s a great question! The answer is that Small Groups include more than just our 21 Traditional Small Groups that currently meet in homes throughout our community. Small Groups include all church-led Small Groups such as Men’s or Women’s Small Group Bible studies, Discipleship/Mentoring Small Groups, the Sportsman’s Small Group, or any

support group such as the DivorceCare Small Group. These all fit into the “Small Group” Pathway of Discipleship.

People are welcome to join more than one Small Group, but everyone should belong to at least one. The goal is to encourage people to be in a close-knit smaller group setting where they can be Rooted in Scripture, Growing in Christ, and Making Disciples.

There is a depth of “knowing” only achievable in smaller gatherings. Life can get messy, and being authentic and open about our messes is usually reserved for only our closest relationships. Sharing the joys, struggles, and sorrows of life with other believers should be the experience of every Christ-follower.

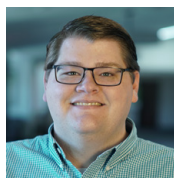
A Small Group is an important way that Christian fellowship is lived out and an important means of maturing in Christ. See Exodus 18:21- 23; Mark 3:14 (Jesus’ small group); Acts 5:42 (the first church at Jerusalem was organized into small groups); see also 1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15 for examples throughout the first-century church.



God never intended that our struggles in life be overcome alone. Neither did God design the disciple-making process as a solo activity. The Small Group is a wonderful ministry to the believer. The community that can happen in a Small Group is unmatched. Small Groups are assembled in a variety of ways. Some groups are made up of people who live in close proximity to one another; others are gender-based or interest-based; some groups have participants who all share the same stage of life.

I pray you will enjoy reading all of the articles about Small Groups in this OakLeaf. You'll read stories of how groups are formed in our Children, Youth, and Adult ministries, hear stories of how God has im-

pacted the lives of many group participants through study and service, and get to see how Small Groups could be a great blessing in your life as well. Come with us on the journey of Small Groups and see how God might bless you and use you to bless others in community!



*Pastor Justin Waples is East White Oak's Outreach and Discipleship pastor. He is married to Abigail and they are blessed with four children. Justin is passionate about equipping the saints for ministry and helping each member reach out and connect with their neighbors and community.*

# Sharing Life in Adult Small Groups

by Brad Horton

## **I've been blessed to be a part of several Small Groups at East White Oak.**

Throughout that time God has given me great encouragement through sharing life together with other believers. Prior to my current Small Group I had the opportunity to attend the Sportsmen Small Group where we dove head first into the book of James. I was so encouraged by being surrounded by men who were willing to be vulnerable with one another. God reminded me through His Word and the men in that study that we must continually submit ourselves to the Lord in humility.

Most recently, Julie and I have had the privilege of being involved in a Small Group led by Jonathan and Kelli Goodyear. It has been equally encouraging to be involved in a study with like-minded believers who want to honor the Lord. One of the things I love most about our current Small Group is how it pro-

vides an element of fun, joy, and hilarity in the pressures that everyday life can dish out.

We truly enjoy being with each other and it is always a joy to laugh and share life together while studying the Word. We recently finished a study on Genesis in conjunction with Pastor Scott's sermon series and it was exciting to see how what we were learning and applying in our Small Group related to Sunday morning messages from the pulpit. I am looking forward to seeing how God is going to use our Small Group this fall to impact his kingdom.



*Brad Horton and his wife, Julie, attend East White Oak with their two teen daughters, Ashleigh and Lexi. Brad served over 17 years in the video ministry at East White Oak and pioneered our Livestream worship service. You'll see him now at the Welcome Center on Sundays. He works in insurance compliance at COUNTRY Financial and enjoys running, biking, and disc golf.*



# Connecting Teens to Christ and One Another

by Amanda Andris

**I grew up not attending church. No Sunday service, no AWANA, and no youth group. So, when I became a believer in my early 20s, my husband and I got plugged in right away.**

I quickly learned just how crucial that fellowship time with other believers really was. Fast forward a couple of years, we began to have children, and I knew the importance of getting our kids involved in the children's and youth ministry from a young age.



When I began to feel a nudge from God leading me towards involvement with high school kids, I definitely questioned it (um, hello, my background is in elementary education... let's stay in my comfort zone here, God). But shortly after, an opportunity arose for me to lead a freshman girls' Youth Small Group. AKA door opened. I nervously accepted, yet somewhat excitedly (hey, at this point, I was spending my days with 3 kids under 3), and I have yet to question that nudge from God.

See, high school ministry is SO cool. Figuratively and literally (these girls keep me young and current with all the trends). We get to dive into the Word every week, and while I hope they can learn something

"We get to dive into the Word every week, and while I hope they can learn something from my leading and experiences, I am learning just as much from them."

from my leading and experiences, I am learning just as much from them. Sure, we dive deep into our Bible study, but we also spend time in fellowship and discussing topics such as adulthood and motherhood, trials and hardships, experiences had, and lessons learned. These are all things that would have had a HUGE impact on my life had I been involved in a Youth Small Group in my teens.

I am in year 3 of high school ministry and can clearly see God's footprints in my life from serving in this position. He's still pushing me outside my comfort zone (considering I was asked to be on the youth pastor search team and am writing this very article), but I've learned to follow His nudges no matter the discomfort. So, I'll stay here, serving in High School Small Groups, until God gives me another nudge moving me somewhere else (or, more like, until my children become high school age and want me out).



*Amanda is married to Ryan and spends her days with their four children, twins Landon & Leighton (6), Rowen (4), and Austin (1). She serves in the East White Oak nursery, and helps with summer Children's Ministry. For fun, you'll find Amanda reading, cheering on the St. Louis Cardinals, traveling, and spending time with friends and family.*

# AWANA Small Groups: Growing Together

by Jenn Gerber

## **Serving in AWANA the past three years gave me the immense privilege of shepherding a Small Group of girls.**

I'd served in AWANA before. In previous years, I volunteered because I was already bringing my kids out to church so I might as well stay and help. But now, my children were all well beyond that stage, and yet I was feeling called back to T&T Girls (Truth and Training, 3rd-6th graders.) I said "yes" and God was so faithful to equip me and bless me tremendously over the next 3 years! Praise Him!



Every Wednesday night, I would have Small Group time with "my girls". I listened to their memorized verses, we talked about that night's lesson, and then we shared prayer requests and prayed. They were fourth graders our first year together and, boy, did those prayer requests change by the time they were sixth graders! They were maturing quickly and reminding me weekly of the difficult things they faced every day at home and at school. It was a complete privilege to pray for each of them. And their sweet prayers for me and my family humbled me, as well. Of course, there were lots of laughs, too. AWANA is a blast!!! I mean – games, prizes, snacks, crafts,

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parties and even a sleepover – who wouldn't love it?? It was such a joy to serve alongside the other leaders—fellowshipping, encouraging and learning from one another as we opened God's Word, shared the Gospel, and pointed the girls to His Truths.

I told "my girls" that even though our Small Group has come to an end (they have now moved on to Jr High) I will still be keeping my eyes on them! I will continue to pray for and be available to them in any ways I can. I pray their years in AWANA and our times together have strengthened their faith in God alone as their firm foundation. And I'm so thankful to God – whenever we say yes to serving him, in the power He alone provides, He never ceases to grow and change us in amazing ways. We can't outgive our generous God!



*Jenn Gerber and her husband Mark have three children ages 17-25.*

*Jenn has served in many roles in Children's Ministry at East White Oak and is currently the Women's Ministry Director. She also serves on the worship team. She is currently the*

*manager of Royal Acres mobile home park and serves as a children's leader with BSF. In her free time she enjoys baking, going for walks, and getting together with friends.*



# A Story of Serving with my Small Group

by Yelena Wiggim

**This spring, our Small Group had an opportunity to serve dinner to a group of international students.**

It was a delightful event on a rainy day with many people showing up, and with us serving traditional American cuisine. It was an event that, not surprisingly, took me back to the time when I was an international student myself. A little over thirty years ago, I came to America as an exchange student from Russia. I don't feel much older now, despite all these years, and it was easy to connect with the smiling faces that came through the line.

One student saw my name tag, and being visibly surprised by the connection he made, quickly switched to Russian language. Before too long, I was at the table of Russian-speaking students from Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Russia (One student even happened to be from a town that is just a few hours away from where I grew up in Southern Russia). It was an unexpected and delightful surprise! It was wonderful to speak to them and learn about their roots, backgrounds, and stories of coming to America.

This short experience made me somewhat nostalgic of the life I used to know back home; the laughter and the unity we shared while I was living there. My father grew up in Azerbaijan, my parents met in Ukraine, and we had relatives in Georgia, Estonia, and Belarus. Our family and friends' gatherings during the holidays were full of joy and laughter. My father would play the accordion with people singing and dancing, and we would spend hours together at a long table talking while enjoying the food my mother spent days preparing. And of course, we would drink tea and listen to my father's hunting stories, which were always a highlight of our family gatherings as he had us all in tears from laughter.



Spending a little time with a Small Group of international students did not feel too much different from the perspective of joy and delight I remember sharing with my friends and family back home. It was short, but it was memorable, refreshing, and unifying. God was there on that rainy evening connecting His people from across the ocean, and it was a blessing to our family to be a part of this experience, as well as serving alongside our wonderful East White Oak Small Group.



*Yelena Wiggim and her husband, Duane, have served as AWANA leaders and are currently involved in a small group. Yelena, Duane, and their two children Dominic (22) and Sasha (16) live in Bloomington. Dominic is pursuing a degree in Mechanical Engineering at*

*Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ, and Sasha will be a senior at Normal West High school. Duane works as a Technical Analyst at State Farm Insurance Company. Yelena works as a Project Management consultant for a local management consulting firm. Her free time is spent reading, gardening, and traveling with family.*

# Bible Studies Build Relationships

by Megan Reeg

**I attended an evening women's Bible Study the summer of 2018. I enjoyed the time in fellowship with other women and realized that I needed that to be a priority in my life.**

Having children in multiple activities made evening Bible study difficult for me to consistently commit to. In the fall, I noticed Precepts being advertised as a daytime Bible Study. I jumped right in and signed up for Ezekiel.

I really didn't know anyone when I started Precepts. But my heart has grown to love the ladies. We share praises and prayer concerns with each other. Our group is multi-generational, with ladies from ages 15 to 82. It is such a blessing to see so many stages of life represented in our group.

Our leader, Lynn Wegman, is a humble, faithful servant. She spends many hours preparing for our classes. She often shares additional resources of books, video links, and songs to help us in our understanding. And when she doesn't know an answer, she doesn't hesitate to reach out to another teacher or pastor for clarification. By studying Precepts, I have learned to slow down in reading the Bible. I have learned to look for key words, repeated phrases, and references to persons/time/place. The Bible has come alive with meaning!

About a year into my Precepts journey, I inquired about having my daughter join our group. Since we home school, it was a natural supplement for us. Isabelle has learned SO much in the last 3 years. I am amazed at what she has absorbed in the classes and how she can use what she's learned to discuss her faith with peers. It has been so much fun for us to be able to dis-



cuss homework together as mother/daughter, AND since we don't have any family in town, she has gained many adoptive grandmas. We even had a backyard birthday party for my daughter last summer with the ladies. The generational wisdom is such a blessing. I can't wait for my youngest daughter to join us!

When asked what I would miss without Precept in my life, my answer is **connection**. I would miss being able to pray with and for each other. I would miss seeing God in action – how He answers those prayers. I would miss the laughter. I would miss the impromptu text messages or emails. I would miss struggling through the Word together, asking hard questions, and learning together. I would miss the friendships.



*Megan Reeg and her husband Patrick are the parents of three children, Brady, Isabelle, and Sylvia. Megan has served as an AWANA leader and loves studying the Bible with other women at East White Oak. She homeschools her high school and junior high daughters, and she volunteers with homeschoool theatre and choir programs. Her favorite free-time activities are napping, reading, and hiking.*



# Building a Small Group Culture

by Dr. Jeff VanGoethem

**In the early 1990's we had two Sunday services at East White Oak, one in the morning and one in the evening. It was a tradition for churches to have a Sunday night service.**

How was it different than the morning service? Not a whole lot. There was singing, praying and a sermon. Perhaps it was a bit more informal. You could loosen your tie. Sometimes give the meeting over to the youth or a visiting missionary. But generally it had the same thrust as the morning service.

I had noticed going back to the 1970's and the 1980's that some churches were moving to a Small Group program of some kind. I did not know much about it, but I looked into it. Many thought that in our rapidly changing culture, with people moving around, often far from family, it seemed like a good idea for churches to develop an additional way of connecting on the relational level. Still studying the Bible, still praying, but maybe in a more relational context.

So one summer in the 1990's East White Oak experimented. We canceled the Sunday evening service for the summer and formed some Small Groups instead. I think we still had a gathering for some at the church who enjoyed the Sunday night service and wanted to continue with it. But we had excellent feedback on the Small Group experiment.

When we called Pastor Mike Fanning around 1995 as an associate pastor, we challenged him with establishing a church-wide Small Group effort for discipleship, relational connections, Bible Study, and prayer. He had a passion for this and did a great job. The rest is history.

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Some years ago I recall interviewing a prospective church member who had gone through the membership class. He related the story of his conversion. He worked with a church member who invited him to their Small Group. Previously he had known only nominal Christianity. For the first time he was drawn into a Bible Study and then he observed how the believers in the group cared and prayed for one another. Soon he comprehended the gospel and was converted.

That reminded me of the best hopes for our Small Groups. Authentic, caring, helping relationships. Studying God's Word. Praying. And inviting the outsider in to explore the Bible and the Christian faith. Small Groups, when done rightly, have an inward discipling aspect and an outward thrust that can be a powerhouse in the church.



*Pastor Jeff VanGoethem has been in pastoral ministry for 40 years, including nearly twenty as Senior Pastor of East White Oak. He has returned to East White Oak after pastoring for some years in Dallas, Texas, to serve as Associate Pastor of Spiritual Development and Missions. He is married to Karen. They have four daughters and four grandchildren.*



## Wednesday Evenings beginning August 31

AWANA is for children Age 3 – 6th grade. Each club meeting is filled with a variety of wonderful activities. Game time includes fun and exciting team building recreation. During Small Groups children work on Scripture memory with their adult leader. Children receive clear age-appropriate instruction from God's word during a Bible lesson. It's faith building, Bible memorizing fun!

Online registration is open!



[EastWhiteOak.church/oakcentral](http://EastWhiteOak.church/oakcentral)



## Women's Ministry

UPCOMING EVENTS

### Woman of Grace Mentoring Program

For married women in their 20's & 30's  
9 weeks. Begins Monday, September 12

### Fall Women's Bible Study Small Groups

Tuesdays & Thursdays  
Watch for details & registration information.

### Gather Women's Event

Connection & Conversation. Invite a friend!  
Tuesday, September 13

### "Lift Up" Worship & Prayer

An evening to draw near to God and one another.  
Tuesday, October 11



## MEN'S FALL RETREAT

October 14-15, 2022

East Bay Camp in Hudson, IL

Save the date! We're asking the men of East White Oak to join us for a retreat focused on discipleship. Don't miss this great opportunity to get connected and grow in your spiritual journey. Registration details will be available in September.