

LEADERS GUIDE for SOUL CARE GROUPS

This guide is meant to help you effectively lead others to listen well to God's still, small voice in a posture of humble curiosity as you ask God to build a transformational community.

These suggestions will help you create an environment where your group can experience spiritual practices as a community. There is no magic formula for this process of building community. The Spirit of God moves unexpectedly and creatively so our primary role is to respond and cooperate with what God is already doing.

At the same time, there are some leadership approaches that will foster group dynamics and nurture relationships that produce transformational environments. So, we offer this guide to give an understanding of how you might form a **monthly 90-minute meeting** to abide with God in a group setting.

Imagine what could happen as you approach life with God together in this way. Imagine the unity, the peace, the joy, and the transformation as our communities “learn the unforced rhythms of grace.” (Matthew 11:28-30 The Message) Vulnerable, honest, intentional time with God and one another will bring us to that place.

CONCEPT

At the risk of overstating the obvious: slow down. Be personally familiar with the slow work of God, with the habit of being still. Only out of the overflow of your own practices of silence, solitude, and surrender, will you influence and invite others to enjoy the presence of God.

These practices won't help us if we approach them as yet another checklist for spiritual growth. Rather, we benefit when we **view these practices as relational experiences**. We will come into God's presence much like Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:1-4):

- Pay attention to what God wants to show you,
- Become curious about what you notice,
- Turn aside and engage with God in that place.

Just as you, the leader, respond to God's invitation to know Him as a friend, as a familiar companion, you can invite others to join you in God's presence.

THE GIFT OF LISTENING

Listening well doesn't come naturally to most of us. Learning to listen well is a skill that develops with intentional practice under the tutelage of the Spirit of God. The first step is to have an understanding and a desire to reflect God's love in our listening. Ask God to help you grow as a listener. Here are some helpful guidelines for creating a safe space for honest sharing:

- Avoid interrupting.
- Avoid crosstalk.
- Avoid fixing, giving advice, or trying to save.
- Give time after a question so internal processors can think before they answer.
- Give good eye contact to the one who is sharing.
- Give an understanding nod or a soft smile to verify that you are listening.
- Remember that your role is to respond, not to take responsibility for solutions.
- Pray silently as you listen.

THE ART of the QUALITY QUESTION

The open-ended question is invaluable in encouraging group members to pursue intimacy with God in group time and in their personal habits. The most helpful questions don't have a right or wrong answer, they help the group members notice God's movements in and around them. Quality questions cannot be answered with "Yes." or "No." They require assessment, evaluation, and connecting the dots between Scripture and lived experience.

Choose some of these open-ended reflection questions to use each time you meet:

- What is God up to in your life?
- Where are you noticing new life, freedom, growth?
- Where are you experiencing resistance?
- What feels hard about this particular way of being with God?
- What is happening to you emotionally, physically, relationally, spiritually?
- What do you want to continue?

THE FIRST MEETING: special notes

Prayerfully choose which spiritual practice or formational concept you want to introduce to your group first. Spend some time in quiet discernment to learn what God's purposes are for this unique group at this particular time.

The LifePoint Resource packets offer a PROVISIONS article to explain the why behind the practice or the concept. The second piece in the packet is a GUIDE that will help you know how to introduce that particular topic to your group. Also included is a TOOL for each person to take home with them as a reminder to prompt them as they become familiar with this new habit.

You might want to send the PROVISIONS article to each of the group members to read in the days immediately prior to the meeting. That reading will help them feel more prepared.

As you begin the group time, find out how many of the group members have read the first PROVISIONS article you selected. If a majority of the group has not read it, you can read the article together so that everyone starts with a common understanding of the practice.

Reassure your group that it's common for new experiences to feel unfamiliar and a bit awkward. Nobody is truly an expert at spiritual practices; we are all on the journey together.

Set the expectation that some spiritual practices will seem more natural than others, depending on how God has "wired" you.

Give your group permission to select some practices to use going forward and leave others on the shelf for later.

Once you have set expectations, move through the time as you will in future gatherings.

THE PROCESS OF EACH GATHERING

The 90 - 120 minutes set for each monthly group meeting can be divided into two parts:

- Sharing what God has done,
- Receiving new input and praying for one another as you move forward.

To begin, rest in prayerful silence to prepare for the group interaction. Remind the group of the value of unplugging from the distractions and stresses of the everyday and focusing on the eternal. (II Cor. 4:16-18)

Invite the group to share how God met them as they engaged with the practice introduced at the last gathering. Use open-ended questions (see Page 2) to encourage sharing about the impact of the practice/concept.

The main thing is to help participants consider what is happening in their actual life *with* God. What kind of transformation are they noticing on the inside, the hidden place where deep calls out to deep? What are they noticing as they come to know God on a more relational level? How are they increasing in their love of God, neighbor, themselves, and their enemies?

Remember to encourage and model good listening skills. Don't be afraid to come back to them from time to time and reset the expectations for the kind of space you are trying to create. We are here to listen to God and to participate with God in the care of our souls.

Introduce a new spiritual practice or concept. If you have asked the group members to read the PROVISIONS prior to the gathering, then you can begin by referencing the article and giving them a Minute to Meditate on one reference or quote from the article. Or you can read the PROVISIONS front page together prior to experiencing the practice.

Then experience the practice or concept together:

- Follow the process given in the resource GUIDE, specific to the practice/concept you have chosen for this week.
- Choose some of the open-ended questions included in this guide.
- Move from one step to the next very slowly, leaving plenty of time for pondering, sharing, and lots of breathing room between steps.
- Encourage your group members to journal as you experience this practice together: paragraphs, bullet points, and lists or word art.

Spend the last part of your time together in groups of 4-5 praying for one another. Base your prayers on what has been shared during this gathering. Pray specifically that this practice or concept will impact the relationships and responsibilities that each one has.

THE INDIVIDUAL FOLLOW-UP for EACH GATHERING

Throughout the time before the next gathering, encourage one another to intentionally follow this abiding practice as a means of enjoying a deeper relationship between you and God.

Investigate the resources given on the back page of PROVISIONS you have just experienced as a community.

A few days before gathering again, send group members the next PROVISIONS article so they can read about a new practice/concept to prepare for your time with the formational community.

COMMUNITY BUILDING IDEAS

Community connections grow and flourish with ongoing care. Surprisingly, it is sometimes the accumulation of the little things, the light-hearted things, the unremarkable things that form lasting bonds with eternal repercussions. Some creative ideas might include:

- Birthday cards – real mail, real stamps, real messages of care
- Traveling “You are Valued” Trophy – a random (preferably ugly or unique) thrift store trophy that is given to someone each month as a reminder that they are valued and prayed for. Then at the next meeting, they pass it to someone else to enjoy until they, too, pass it on.
- Obscure celebrations – Linger for half an hour after your set meeting time to celebrate Strawberry Ice Cream Day (Jan. 15), or National Scribble Day (March 27 - play Pictionary), or Grilled Cheese Day (April 12 - have a taste test contest), etc.
- Gratitude List – Have a long piece of paper posted every month. As people come into the gathering, they each write what they are grateful for on the list.