

Spiritual Friendship Groups 1.0

What is a spiritual friendship group?

It is an organically multiplying group of 2-4 Christ followers of the same sex who meet regularly to encourage one another in following Jesus and who pray for the Kingdom to come in the lives of those in our sphere of influence – co-workers, friends, family, those God puts on our hearts through our missional engagement. They are sometimes called “life transformation groups”, “spiritual formation groups”, or least accurately, “accountability groups”; accountability is only one of several functions they accomplish. (If accountability is the sole focus of groups, they will wither and die under this direct sunlight w/o rain and other nutrients.) The spiritual friendship group (SFG) leverages the power of real relationships lived in the Spirit, under the Word of God for growth in Christ rather than relying on external, programmatic hierarchically driven models of ministry, which have a place in the Kingdom, but can bottleneck the Kingdom’s advance if everything runs through them. Western, urban/suburban Christian’s schedules are demanding. This can make a weekly or an every other week meeting schedule difficult to maintain. We need to be creative with facebook, twitter, email, and other social networking tools to keep up with each other if our meetings are more than two weeks apart.

This kind of fellowship releases the essential elements for growth, accountability, and mission in our lives. Our God given desire to grow and the loving investment in one another’s growth is the “glue” that holds the group together and also causes it to multiply as those we love and pray for come into the Kingdom and need spiritual friendship. A shared joy is a doubled joy. Like Jesus’ parable of the crazy farmer who planted the dreaded mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32), which once it started in a farmer’s fields could not be controlled because the almost invisible seeds spread everywhere on the wind, spiritual friendship groups move from church to neighborhood to workplace to school . . . They are simple, essential, self-led, and self-propagating when the proper DNA is established in a church or fellowship.

What is done in a spiritual friendship group?

Three simple yet irreducible and essential tasks are accomplished each meeting, preferably in this order:

1. **Mutual Encouragement:** we share about God’s work in our souls, we confess our sins in a safe and confidential environment, we pray for one another, and we hold out the Kingdom vision for growth and vitality for one another.
2. **Sharing God’s Word:** We share about how God has spoken to us since we met last. We help each other keep accountable to a common Scripture reading plan. We also help one another discern God’s voice in circumstance, relationships, the creation, and counsel of others.
3. **Prayer for the Kingdom’s Advance:** We pray for souls specifically, consistently, hopefully, and strategically – those whom God has put in our lives to love and be in mission with/towards. We give priority to pray for those who are not actively following Jesus or situations where the Kingdom needs to come vs. falling into

the gravitational spiral of just praying for each other's work, family and other needs, as vital as it is to uplift each other in prayer.

The reason for the order is that confession of sin and the sharing of our heart's journey of faith tends to create a holy climate right up front, enabling the group to be "real" and not hovering around in small talk or even "God talk" that is not really what needs to be spoken for the group to encounter the Spirit and one another at a transformative level.

There is no curriculum, books, or prior training needed for any group of 2-3 to form a spiritual friendship group. As we grow in grace we will be better able to listen, to ask appropriate questions, to discern God's work in our friends, but being "good" at these skills is not a pre-requisite for being in an SFG or even starting one.

How do we focus on the majors in our conversation?

Groups need a foundational set of questions that we share with each other and keep in mind, not woodenly, but like a Constitution which anchors us and inspires us forward. Since there is no leader, only a convener, reflecting together in the Spirit of love on a holistic set of questions helps the group keep the main thing the main thing. The Constitution of Jesus' discipleship agenda is the Sermon on the Mount and the parables. Basically, we want to be drawing our cues on what a mature Christian life is from Jesus himself, his words and his life. It is helpful at the start of a SFG if a convener who has experienced this level of relationship steers the group safely into the deep water and keeps the questions in mind during the meeting time. There are many sets of questions that can be used, some very specific, and others generic and open ended. We strongly suggest questions that cover the following areas:

1. **Our Affections –Yahweh vs. Idols:** The spiritual temperature of our hearts with God and the temptations and false gods that draw our hearts away. Speaking honestly about spiritual disciplines and our habits/addictions is how we get real. Confession of sin, repentance, and absolution are a regular practice.
2. **Love of Neighbor:** How have we been able to love those closest to us in the past period? How have we fallen short? Is forgiveness and softness of heart present?
3. **God's Word to Us:** How has God been speaking to us? How have we been responding to his invitation? Have we been holding to our agreement in drinking in the word as a group?
4. **Witness:** How do we plan to demonstrate and speak the love of Christ to unbelievers? those who have fallen away from God? those in need of God's encouragement?

Below is a list of questions we suggest groups begin with. As we move forward together, God will, no doubt, help us adapt questions that suite groups at different life stages, e.g. a group of moms w/tots vs. a group of single college age guys.

River Spiritual Friendship Group Questions

1. What is the condition of your heart? To what degree have you been able to keep your heart in the love of God, “delighting in the Lord” and receiving his merciful love since our last meeting? (Lk. 10:26-28, Ps. 34:8, Jn. 6:35, Jude 20-21)
 - Are you creating sacred space in your life, slowing down to hear God, keeping the Sabbath holy? (It is one of the big 10 – we were designed for it.)
 - Can you share something encouraging about God’s goodness with us? (Heb. 10:24-25, Phil. 4:4-9)
2. How are you wrestling with evil heart states this past season? Anxiety, low self-image, bitterness/blame, regret, impatience, envy/jealousy, despair, pride, or disordered desires/acts relating to money, sex, power, food, computer use, etcetera. (Heb. 3:12-15)
 - Have you given in to an addiction this past week?
 - Is there sin you need to confess?
 - Is there a spiritual practice you need to exercise to combat a temptation/addiction/heart of unbelief?
 - Are you being fully honest with us?
3. How are you doing in loving those in most intimate relationship with you as Christ has loved you? (Jn. 15:9-14)
 - Do you need to humble yourself and/or ask forgiveness?
 - Do you need help taking the beam out of your own eye? (Mt. 7:1-5)
 - How can you bring God’s shalom into those relationships in this season?
4. How did God speak to you since our last meeting?
 - Are you delighting in the Word? (Col. 3:16, Ps. 119)
 - How else might God be speaking to you or challenging you? (nature, circumstances, relationships, vision work, etc.)
 - What is God’s invitation to the Abundant Life, the easy yoke to you?
 - How are you responding to God’s Word/invitation? (Jn. 10:10, Mk. 10:28-30, Mt. 10:28-30)
5. Who or what situation shall we pray for to see Jesus’ Kingdom come? (Mt. 6:9-13) Who is God calling you to make a Gospel witness to? (generosity, verbal witness, hospitality, listening, peacemaking, offer of prayer) Is there someone we can we invite into our SFG?

Depending on the group’s stage of trust, and our particular issues, we might ask more specific questions of one another such as, “Tell me about your experience dealing with pornography this last week?” or “Let’s look at how we are each spending money and what that says about where our treasure lies?” (Mt. 6:21) In many churches, the questions for the SFG’s are printed on bookmarks that can fit in a Bible and provided online for smartphones. It is impossible that each member answer each and every question each week. Some SFG’s choose to focus one meeting on a single member’s life, rotating around the circle every 3 meetings. These questions are provided as a 360° window that a group would have as a safety net and a goal to reach towards. These are also questions we

should have in the back of our minds as we listen to one another and love one another as friends, spouses, and partners in ministry.

Drinking in God's Word Together

*They (God's Words) are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.
Psalm 19:10*

Many believers find it difficult to maintain Word disciplines of reading, meditation and memorization in our hectic and fragmented lives. We find it hard to locate ourselves and our daily experiences and pressures in God's story. Even more challenging is to maintain the heart that treasures God's Word at the level of "pure gold" or sweeter to our spiritual senses than pure honey on our tongue. Only God, through the prayers and pains of spiritual habits can keep our spiritual senses awake and tuned to God. In this world, our heart's love for God and for loving our neighbor will fluctuate and go through seasons of ease and of wrestling to keep our affections ordered. It is essential for our growth to have lives "shaped by the Word". As Peter said when all the disciples were leaving Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go, you alone have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:68)

Accountability for positive habit development is one of God's secrets that people in the world use to great effect – the 12 step movement, physical fitness groups, book clubs, to name a few. If encountering God's Word in a 4-5 day period does not give us the savor of honey, if we don't yearn for a Word to us, then we need to confess our heart to spiritual friends who can pray and discern what is blocking our hearts – sin, exhaustion, affliction, demonic attack, a lack of obedience to the Word leading to indifference are a few of the potential causes of this dangerous soul state. For many, seeing God's word in nature, experiencing it through the love of a friend, or tasting actual sweetness, like a dove bar, and praying, "O Jesus, you are more sweet than this dove bar!", "God, you are more invigorating than this coffee!", are the way God makes himself alive to our souls, which in this life, will always need encouragement to worship God and joyfully obey.

There are a number of really good Bible reading plans available. It is important that there is a balance of Old and New Testament together. Many Christians are rediscovering the ancient Christian practice of reading/praying the "divine office" reading plan, based on the earliest Christian's emphasis on the Psalms and the Gospels as the focus, but also including Epistle and Old Testament readings in a morning and evening plan. Brad and other River staff have adopted this model. It can be found in the *Book of Common Prayer* and online at <http://www.missionstclare.com/english/index.html>. If we have no time for reading, we can listen in the car or even while nursing the baby. Free MP3 downloads of the Bible are available for use in commuting, house chores, etc. <http://www.audiotreasure.com/> Many parents testify to 6-8 year old kids and even

hardened teens being entranced by the dramatized “Inspired By” audio Bible featuring top African American actors and singers. <http://www.thebibleexperience.us/>

The most important thing is that our intake of the Word be more than just reading for information, but our submitted hearts and minds reading for God’s word for our lives, “today” (Ps. 95, Hb. 3:7-19, 4:7-16), even if it is just one paragraph or one verse. The group may decide to re-read one week’s reading over if a particular book of the Bible is speaking to the members and the members were unable, that week, to finish the reading. The key is how is God shaping us with the Word? How is God encountering us freshly in the creation? In our souls? In our relationships?

Praying with Faith

It is good for each member to keep a record of situations and people prayed for to see God’s work over time. A reminder to pray daily should be established – a cell phone alarm, a card on the bathroom mirror, a facebook reminder, a card in our Bible, etc. The group should have at least 2 names for each member, 6 names for 3 person group, that it is praying for to see God’s redemption, not just folks distant or abstract, but people we see regularly and are hungry for God to show his glory and love by bringing them Home, giving them justice/mercy, and healing. Praying daily as a team will increase our faith and God will bring answers to show his grace and increase our faith to pray with more boldness for tougher situations.

Some good texts to use when praying for others: John 6:44, Acts 17:27, 1 Thes. 2:13, 2 Cor. 4, 2 Tim. 2:25-26, Col. 4:3-6, Eph. 6:19-20, 1 Thes. 1:9-10, Ro. 10, 9-10, Lk. 8:15, Ez. 36:25-27, and Ez. 37 for the tough cases)

Very often those who come to faith through the group’s prayers can form the next group with one of the founding group’s members as the facilitator/initiator. It is possible for an individual to be in multiple SFG’s, as much as their situation in life allows.

Guidelines vs. Laws

The goal of spiritual friendship groups is Christian maturity – growing individuals increasing in ‘love one another’ community, reaching out to our broken world. This is one of the main goals Jesus has for the church’s mission on earth. These kind of intentional mutual shepherding relationships are essential in a culture of isolation and individualism where a small group or ministry team leader cannot realistically shepherd each individual in her group. SFG’s should be altered and improved to achieve Christian growth and small group health, e.g. someone might develop a meeting format with skype, facebook, or twitter that multiplies connection for a group whose life situations do not allow for much face-to-face time. ***SFG’s should not be an unnatural yoke that we lay on people who participate grudgingly or half-heartedly.*** They are not “the secret weapon”, only the Holy Spirit can bring growth in our lives and fruit for our broken world to be nourished through us. The desires to grow and the humble desire to be in mutual influence relationships are the prerequisites for the spiritual journey. If people are not ready for that or their lives are in crisis we don’t “guilt” them into any structure. If it’s a chronic lifestyle of crisis or a person is a professed believer who exhibits little interest in growth, we are charged with warning and admonishing one another in love. Letting a sister or brother go on in a lukewarm state, or one where Christian growth is an

afterthought is not love. (Col. 3:16 and see seminar handout on admonishing at <http://www.the-river.org/leaders/> 3/14/09 training packet.)

Summary

The Spiritual Friendship Group is built on God's use of the "2 or 3" system for spiritual growth and mission, e.g. Jesus sending the 12 and 70 two by two, Peter, James, and John with Jesus, Paul and Timothy, Paul and Barnabus, Paul and Silas, etc. It incorporates the values of community, mutual shepherding, mission, and reproduction. In the Kingdom of God, and by faith, at the River, there is a place for everyone to grow in Christ who can commit to an SFG. There is no need for anyone to wait for the next small group to open or for explorations to come around again or for a time on a pastor's calendar. Groups can multiply quickly and also last, depending on their organic life. A person may also be in more than one SFG depending on calling and life stage. If God grants the River many newcomers and even seekers, we can provide the framework of SFG's for their growth and development immediately and give guidance as issues arise.

Bibliography & Resources

Mindy Caliguire. *Discovering Soul Care*. 2007.

Neil Cole, *Search and Rescue – Becoming a Disciple Who Makes a Difference*. Baker books. 2008

Margaret Funk, *Thoughts Matter – the Practice of the Spiritual Life*. 1999

Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert – Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. 2004

John Piper, *Future Grace*. 1998.

Propagation

Feel free to propagate this material everywhere. Encourage your family and friends at other churches to experiment with SFG's and ask how they are adapting them to their situation. Copies of this constitution will be available on the River web site in the resources section.