

From

A Guide to Faithfulness Groups
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Inner Light Books
San Francisco, California

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Guidelines for Faithfulness Groups

The purpose of faithfulness group meetings is to help participants pay attention to God's presence and activity as they seek to faithfully follow divine guidance in service, witness, following a leading, carrying out a ministry, or the activities of daily life. Faithfulness groups provide ongoing support, assistance with discernment, and spiritual accountability for group members. During a typical two-hour session, two people will be the focus of the group for about one hour each. Each focus person presents something about their current faith life and recent efforts, struggles, opportunities, or leadings to be faithful.

The role of the group is to prayerfully listen to the presentation and then, as prompted by the Spirit, to ask questions that may help the presenter explore more deeply their relationship to, awareness of, and response to the Spirit in their efforts to be faithful. Occasionally, group members mirror for the participant what they have witnessed. This process is a form of spiritual nurturing for the presenter as well as an ongoing committee for mutual clearness and accountability. Ideally, the group meets on an ongoing basis and leadership is shared by all. In the rotation, each member has a regular opportunity to be the focus of the group's attention.

Group Atmosphere: Holy Accompaniment

The faithfulness group is a practice of holy accompaniment. Group meetings are conducted with a prayerful, reverent, contemplative attitude. Participants listen in a relaxed yet very attentive way to one another and at the same time also notice their own inner responses, looking for the presence of the Spirit. The group is attentive to God in what is happening moment by moment, with the intention of helping one another be likewise attentive to the Divine in daily life. Group members refrain from posing questions too quickly or in a forced manner. Instead, each person waits to sense and respond to the Spirit's movement, allowing questions to surface gently. Ample time for silence during the discussion is needed.

When the prayerful and contemplative atmosphere of the group slides into problem-solving, advice-giving, analysis, criticism, storytelling, or tangential discussions, it is important to recall the group's intention to listen for God and to return attention to the Spirit. Group members are responsible to attend to their own awareness in this way as well as to keep noticing the overall atmosphere of the group to see if some gentle correction might be needed, such as, "Could we have some silence right now?" or "I wonder if we can return to our focus?" The goal for each member is to gently try to hear and respond to the movement of the Spirit within the meeting of the group itself.

Focus of the Meetings

Each meeting should be carefully centered around experiences and concerns related specifically to the presenter's effort to be faithful. This includes how the faith and prayer experience of the presenter affects their faithfulness. In an attitude of open, humble, and holy accompaniment, the group maintains a focus on the presenter's spiritual concerns, experiences, feelings, faith, blocks, blind spots, gifts, discernment, confidence, and confusion in their effort to be faithful and in their reflection afterward.

It may be helpful for the presenter to ask the group for help paying attention to specific spiritual concerns, yet the presenter must avoid seeking advice or suggestions. The focus should not be upon other people or their experiences unless information about them might shed light on the presenter's condition, discernment, and faithfulness. Although it is often tempting to engage in problem-solving, this should be avoided. Keep the focus on the spiritual awareness of the presenter and on everyone's moment-by-moment attentiveness to the Divine. Doing so strengthens the presenter's ability to access spiritual guidance from within.

Presentations

Each presenter has fifteen minutes to tell the group about events, inner movements, and concerns related to their efforts to be faithful. The presentation may include a specific incident or interaction, or it may be a description of a particular faithful activity, service, leading, witness, or ministry as it has developed over time. It could be a follow-up on a situation that has been previously presented. It is up to the presenter to discern what material to present and what form this should take. This calls for prayerful reflection ahead of time. The presenter should always include some information about what they experience when they pray (or 'hold in the Light') the events and experiences, questions and concerns that they are bringing to the group. Presentations should include only enough information about others as is needed to provide an adequate understanding of the presenter's experience. Aspects of the presenter's service or ministry may require anonymity. If this is the case, the presenter may need to create a fictional name and disguise some identifying details about those they are serving.

Brief, Factual Questions of Clarification

After a presentation, the convener asks if there are any necessary, brief, factual questions of clarification. Group members only ask this sort of question if the presentation was not clear on an essential point and some quick clarification is required in order to understand the situation. The time needed for this clarification reduces the time available for deeper questions and exploration, so it is important to avoid asking questions that are motivated only by curiosity. It is not necessary for group members to fully understand a situation in order to be helpful to the presenter. Group members should only ask clarification questions that will help the group serve the presenter.

Questions and Deeper Exploration

After any brief questions of clarification, the group settles into a short period of silent prayer and worship, out of which deeper questions for the focus person are posed. Prompted by the Spirit, these questions are intended to help the presenter focus on what is happening in their relationship with God in their efforts to be faithful. Avoid asking questions just for the sake of asking questions. No straining or striving to come up with a question is needed. Silent, prayerful accompaniment provides an opportunity to sense questions that are being prompted by the Spirit and reduces the human tendency to fill silences that may feel empty but are not.

Faithfulness is aided by helping to make conscious any blocks within the presenter in order that they may seek divine assistance in dissolving them and become more clearly and immediately present to the reality of the Spirit in their efforts or struggles to be faithful. The faithfulness group format assumes that if the members of the group are openly and willingly attuned to the Spirit, any necessary assistance, learning, critique, and prayer will be expressed or revealed inwardly to the presenter, with the help of the group's

prayerful presence and Spirit-led questions. Though it can be tempting to apply psychological interpretations to the presenter's behavior, challenges, and opportunities, this is not the work of the faithfulness group. Members are encouraged to maintain a humble, reverent attitude toward the work of the Spirit within the presenter.

Confidentiality

It is important to remember that everything shared in the group is confidential. Participants can speak about their own experience and learning in the group, but the stories and information shared by others should not be repeated. After the group meeting is over, it is also important that group members not initiate discussion with the presenter about confidential details or considerations related to their presentation. It is up to the presenter to initiate any further conversation about something that was presented.

Growing into the Format Together

In the beginning, as group members learn the discipline of this format, the faithfulness group practice can feel awkward. Open-hearted sharing and disclosure of one's spiritual challenges is a tender and occasionally uncomfortable experience, but as intimacy and trust develop, this becomes easier. Over time, groups learn how to accompany each other into deep realms of faithfulness. Members become like experienced ensemble musicians, taking turns asking questions as they accompany one another with the guidance of the Holy Spirit that is working through the group as a whole.

The Schedule of a Faithfulness Group Meeting

The suggested schedule for each two-hour meeting is as follows:

1. OPENING—Convener briefly reminds group about the intended focus and attitude
2. PRAYER AND SILENT WORSHIP—5 minutes, led by convener
3. FIRST PRESENTATION—Up to 15 minutes; group listens silently to the presentation, and the presenter includes mention of his or her prayer about the situation
4. BRIEF, FACTUAL QUESTIONS of CLARIFICATION (if needed)
5. SILENT PRAYER AND REFLECTION—2 minutes
6. DEEPER QUESTIONS AND EXPLORATION—35 minutes total for 4, 5, and 6
7. BREAK—5 minutes
8. SECOND PRESENTATION—Up to 15 minutes
9. BRIEF, FACTUAL QUESTIONS of CLARIFICATION (if needed)
10. SILENT PRAYER AND REFLECTION—2 minutes
11. DEEPER QUESTIONS AND EXPLORATION—35 minutes total for 9, 10, and 11
12. EVALUATION OF THE MEETING—5 minutes; see guidelines in the next section
13. CLOSING WORSHIP—2 to 5 minutes
14. CLOSING

If the group meets for longer than two hours, additional time can be devoted to silence and prayer at the beginning, after the break, and at the closing. In addition, the break can be longer than five minutes.

Some groups meet for a meal together beforehand and use that time to hear from members who will not be presenting that day. Groups who do not share food first may want to meet for two and a half hours in

order to allow for a brief “check-in” at the beginning from the members of the group who will not be presenters at that meeting. If some group members have busy schedules and limited time, it is best to ensure that meetings stay within the two-hour schedule listed above.

Evaluating and Processing the Meeting

Before closing, the convener asks the group to reflect on the meeting, including the sense of prayerful presence within the group, noting what facilitated it and what seemed to get in the way. From the standpoint of the presenter and other group members, was there a sense of spiritual discernment happening for the presenter? Questions such as the following might help. In the five minutes allotted to this time of evaluation at the end of a meeting, it is rarely possible to discuss all of these questions. Over time, however, a group can reflect on each of the following:

1. How well did we stay focused on those who were presenting and their relationship with God rather than on the situation or those being served?
2. Were there any moments when we strayed from our focus? For example, did we engage in problem-solving or analysis or did group members tell their own stories?
3. What was the quality of our attention to the Spirit, and was there sufficient silence?
4. Did we all remain faithful to the inner Guide?
5. How was God able to work through us as a team?

Presenters might share which questions seemed to be especially helpful or describe a moment when they had a particular sense of the Spirit, experienced an inner ring of truth, or received a new insight. Or they might suggest what might have been more helpful, such as leaving more silence after each answer or at a specific point.

Over time, it may be helpful for the group to notice if patterns arise among them that make it difficult to stay focused on the presenter and that person’s relationship with God. Do group members tend, for example, to ask questions too quickly, not leaving enough silence for presenters to absorb the truth of what they have just said? Does the group or certain members get hooked on a regular basis into offering suggestions or trying to solve problems? Does the group veer into psychological analysis?

These guidelines are intended to support people in their efforts to be faithful. They are modified from the Shalem Institute Spiritual Guidance Program’s peer group guidelines, with the permission of Shalem Institute. To learn more about Shalem’s programs, go to Shalem.org.

For links to videos and other resources about Faithfulness Groups, visit the Faithfulness Groups page on the website A Whole Heart, awholeheart.com