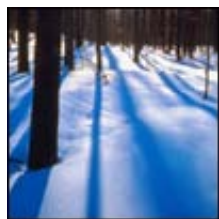


Practical Ministry Skills: Soul Care



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Resources and Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of small-group ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a training meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This specific theme is designed to help equip group leaders on the principles and practices of soul care—both individually and in community. You may use it either for a group training session or to give to people who regularly care for the souls of others, or are in need of soul care themselves. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to explore the tension between "abiding" and "abounding" in the Christian life, see "The Unending Tension" by John Ortberg (p. 4). Check out "The Gift of Rest," by Lynne M. Baab (p. 7), for an interesting look on the relationship between soul care and the Sabbath. And be sure to examine the small-group leader's role in soul care by reading "The Small-Group Leader as Spiritual Guide," by Tom Bandy (pp. 8–9).

We hope you benefit from this theme as you look after your own soul, and the souls of others in your community.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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Soul Care 101

A broad overview of the principles and practices

Psalm 23:1–3

So what, exactly, is soul care? It is living soulfully—living “with the nurturing of the soul in mind.”

Soul care takes us past the immediate and physical to what is truly important. It figures out what truly matters in life and then realigns the self to those higher priorities. Focusing on the truly important dimension of life, we realize that soul development requires a lifelong process of examining spiritual reality. Soul care involves relationships, personal spiritual growth, inner healing and change, rest and rejuvenation, and living with heaven in mind. It slows down the frenetic lifestyle to make time for the soul.

In contrast, much of our generation insists upon instant gratification. Many live with myopic vision—focused on the immediate, the money, and the allure of success. And we want it now. This value system gives only empty, hollow feelings of superficial success, stealing any sense of real purpose. Our goals are limited to today at the expense of the ultimate. We sacrifice the core of who we are to chase passing interests. We don’t know how to serve others.

People who live from their soul regularly make changes that move toward authentic transformation, not pseudo-change. They want what God wants for them. They embrace the best as truly the best and try not to settle for less. They evolve into “deep people” who live beyond appointments and cell phones. They might make appointments for prayer and communion with God, or notes to remind themselves to serve others or call someone for spiritual support. They know that they are not alone. They know that they are not self-made.

Shallow people hit dead ends. They go it alone, having no substance to hold them up. The wind can blow them away like straw. They faint and quit. Sometimes they become cynical about their lives and faith. They ask, “Why am I here?”

Tending your soul stretches you to seek what really matters. You are caring for a person God cares for—you. Do you think it selfish to care for your own soul? Do you consider it a luxury? If so, consider that soul care leads us into more fulfilling relationships, purposeful work, and a sense that God is with us. Plumbers, teachers, business leaders, homemakers, or merchants begin to look upon work as a calling. We perform our duties soulfully.

Exploring the value, worth, and dimensions of the soul ventures inside, reflects on how to practice soul care, and helps us describe the states inside. Can we find God’s profound and unconditional love? Might we discover what gives us joy and makes us feel more alive?

Soul care isn’t a cookie-cutter process. God makes each human as a unique individual. We discover satisfaction as we shape our spiritual practices in ways that nourish and restore our individual souls. Then we can reemerge into the world to passionately pursue our calling, as we love and support others on their paths.

—STEPHEN W. SMITH; excerpted from *Embracing Soul Care* (Kregel Publishers, 2006). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. What does “focusing on the truly important dimension of life” look like for you personally?
2. Can you name three hobbies or practices that help you feel restored?
3. Which element of soul care are you best at practicing? Which element requires the most help?



The Unending Tension

Somewhere between “abiding” and “abounding” is a quiet, productive place.

1 Corinthians 15:58

Do you feel the tension between abounding and abiding? I live with it every day. It’s unending. I want to discover the deepest passions that God hard-wired into me. I want some fire in my belly. I want to abound. But on the other side of my life is Jesus’ statement in John 15:4: “Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must abide. Neither can you bear fruit by yourself. You must abide.”

I expect to wrestle with this tension till I die. But if I’m going to both abide and abound, I need to practice certain principles.

I Need to Focus on What Matters Most

Each morning, I make a W.A.M.M. (What Activities Matter Most?) list. I need crystal clarity on what’s important and what’s peripheral. Peter Drucker writes that recognizing what counts as a true contribution is the great challenge for people in work like ours. If I don’t do this, it’s embarrassing to me how much time I can waste.

I Need to Be Fully Present

Jean Pierre de Caussade described the “Sacrament of the Present Moment.” It means being fully present to God’s call *right now*. It means devoting myself fully to the task—writing or counseling or leading or speaking—with my whole being. It means when I come home, I must learn the difficult art of leaving work behind and becoming fully present with my family.

I have learned that certain forces keep me from experiencing this sacrament: ingratitude, irritability, tension, a chronic sense that there’s never enough time. It’s not just that we wrestle with these forces; it’s that we glorify them. Busyness, fatigue, and over-scheduling become signs of being important. Dorothy Bass noted that the fourth commandment is the only one that people, even people in ministry, commonly boast about breaking.

I Need Rhythm

One striking aspect of the Creation narrative is that God didn’t get all his work done at once. Why not? It wouldn’t have been hard for him. God was establishing a pattern, a rhythm, for people made in his image.

God worked. And when he was done, God rested. He never burned out. He never said, “Thank me it’s Friday.” I need to make sure I have a rhythm that includes solitude. I have to schedule solitude, write it in the calendar, and protect it fiercely. Sometimes mine are brief periods of solitude; sometimes they’re longer. But my days for solitude never volunteer. They have to be drafted.

I Need a Plan for My Leisure

Some time ago I noticed a pattern: my days off would come up, and I had no idea what I wanted to do with them. I have friends who sometimes have whole vacations available but don’t give any thought to what will be life-giving and joy-producing. No wonder we wrestle with fatigue!

I Need to Focus

Specifically, I need to focus on abounding where God has gifted and placed me. To abide and abound, I have to be very clear about the gifts and passions God has given me. And so often ego gets in the way. It’s one thing to embrace my gifts. It’s another to embrace my limitations. But to take an unblinking look at my limitations is one of the greatest tests of character I know.

—JOHN ORTBERG; reprinted from our sister publication CHRISTIANITY TODAY, © 2003 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit ChristianityToday.com.

Discuss

1. Am I more focused on abiding or abounding in my walk with God?
2. What are some of my most successful experiences with abiding? Abounding?
3. Which of the principles above will help me achieve a better balance?



Openness: The Beginning of Soul Care

Here's what we bring to the table in the process of our own transformation.

Psalm 131:2

Transformation can be a long, slow process. But make no mistake, when God moves in a human soul, it changes. A transaction of sorts is underway. Just as transactions in your bank account fundamentally change the nature of what's there, spiritual transactions have that same quality.

At the Table with God

When transactions take place in the business world, there are generally two or more parties who “come to the table.” Picture yourself sitting at a table with God. What's on the table is your soul's transformation. For health to be restored and for transformation to occur, both you and God will need to bring something to the table. What unique qualities will God contribute to what the team needs to accomplish? The list is quite extensive:

- Power to change a human soul
- Complete understanding of why things are the way they are
- Compassion to look with eyes of love on the truth of who we are
- Vision for us and the purpose for which he's made us
- Wisdom to see the past, the now, the future, and the path between here and there
- Forgiveness for our sin

God is not some stern ruler who's impatiently waiting for us to “get it right.” Instead, God is the loving, powerful lover of our souls who sits in that chair at all times, in all circumstances, offering what he and only he can bring to the table of transformation. And he brings quite a bit.

We Bring Openness

What about us? What do we bring? Not much by comparison, for sure. But bring it we must, or the deal won't go through. Several words could describe it, but a good one would be this: openness. We bring a willingness to let God do what only he can do in our hearts. Other ways to say it would be that we bring humility—yieldedness or brokenness. But the main idea is that we basically bring ourselves, and we bring ourselves open.

This is critical. God is a respecter of persons; he will not barge through the boundaries of our interior world uninvited. Just as he refrains from forcing anyone into relationship with him in the first place, God will not force you to receive his love and nurture and presence. If the transformation that your soul so desperately needs—and that God is so eager to provide—is going to happen, you have to sit down in that chair at the table. Then you'll need to stop squirming, get quiet in that chair, and lean in to hear the One sitting across from you.

Seems pretty small, doesn't it? Amazingly, though, sitting down in your chair can be very difficult to do. Rather than actually sitting down to be with God, many people spend far too much time in the general vicinity where God is, yet refuse to sit down. They prefer instead to run tiresome laps around the room, bustling about with all kinds of “virtuous” activities, slapping the Almighty a high-five every once in a while as they pass by.

No question, we're made to run—to exert and accomplish and contribute and work and serve and lead. But we're also made to connect, to receive, to be transformed, and to be loved. And as God has designed the spiritual life, we're designed to do all that accomplishing out of the overflow of the connecting, not the reverse.

—MINDY CALIGUIRE; adapted from *Discovering Soul Care* by Mindy Caliguire. © 2007 by Mindy Caliguire. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press. P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60151-1426. www.ivpress.com

Discuss

1. Looking at the list of what God brings to the table during soul transformation, what is most appealing to you right now?
2. In what ways have you already experienced God's transformation in your life?
3. How can you adjust your schedule in order to “get quiet” at the table with God?



Rejuvenation for Church Leaders

10 practical ways to refresh your soul

James 4:8

How does a soul find rejuvenation? That is the question LEADERSHIP journal asked dozens of church leaders. Here are 10 things they have done to benefit their souls:

Take a walk. Regularly taking a long walk can quiet your soul and help you draw near to God. Many pastors report using walks to internalize their sermons and prepare their souls to preach.

Pray the daily offices. In the early centuries, Christians gathered at designated times during the day for prayer. These prayer times, known as “offices,” are still practiced by believers today. With the aid of a prayer book, you can pray alone knowing that others across the globe are sharing in your prayers at the same time.

Say no. People are always clamoring for our time and energy. Learning to say no, even to good ministries and opportunities, will give the soul room to breathe and find rejuvenation.

Fast from media, even ministry books. The amount of information available today is never-ending, including literature available to church leaders about ministry. While some of it is clearly beneficial, sometimes we need to rest from filling our heads with new insights and the pressure to implement them.

Exercise. Many pastors told us regular exercise is critical to the health of the soul as well as the body. And research has shown that a healthy body positively impacts a person’s emotional and mental capacities.

Laugh. One leader says, “After a difficult Sunday at church I like to come home and watch my DVD collection of *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. The slapstick humor helps me fight the temptation to take ministry, or myself, too seriously.”

Find a spiritual director. Not exactly therapy, not quite coaching, a spiritual director offers something else: a God’s-eye view of your soul. Dieter Zander, pastor of spiritual formation at Bay Marin Community Church in Novato, California, visits his director, Father Tom, once a month. “Just the discipline of going to him and submitting to his insights has been a rich experience for me,” Zander says.

Meditate on the Lord’s Prayer. The Eastern Church has a tradition known as *hesychasm*. This is the practice of repeating a short prayer, such as the Lord’s Prayer, over and over. Try sitting in silence for five minutes, and then say the Lord’s Prayer reflectively aloud. Afterward, center your thoughts on one word or phrase and allow it to inspire your own prayers to God.

Begin a hobby. When we asked pastors and church leaders how they refresh their souls, many said they rely on a hobby unrelated to ministry. Some hobbies were highly physical, like surfing or rock climbing. Others were more contemplative and creative, like model-building or painting or writing poetry.

Write an encouraging letter. Proverbs 12:25 says, “Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up.” The proverb does not specify whether the benefit is for the heart that receives the good word or the heart that gives it. Take time to reflect on a person who has blessed your life and ministry. After thanking God for him or her, write the person a letter of gratitude and encouragement. The exercise might bring cheer to both of your hearts.

—SKYE JETHANI; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 2007 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit Leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. Have you had a positive experience with one of these activities?
2. Which activity would you most like to make a regular part of your week?
3. What would you have to do in order to regularly participate in the activities listed above?



The Gift of Rest

Here's how to embrace the blessings of the Sabbath, and why we must do so.

Exodus 20:8–11

When I first started observing the Sabbath 25 years ago, it wasn't by choice. My husband and I lived in Tel Aviv, Israel, at the time, and everything in our neighborhood—stores, movie theaters, and restaurants—closed from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Even the buses stopped running for 24 hours. Since we didn't own a car, this greatly affected our lives.

Back in the States, our family decided to continue observing the Sabbath on Sundays. Our first son had been born in Israel, and our second son was born soon after we returned home. As a young family, we read to our children, took long walks, and went to the zoo and the park after church.

As the years passed and our children grew up, our Sabbaths changed. But two things stayed constant: a slower pace and no work.

Slow Down

Never did a culture need the Sabbath as ours does today. It pressures us to be productive 24/7. Everything we do has to look good and accomplish something. Nothing encourages us to stop. But the word “Sabbath” literally means “stop, pause, cease, desist.” Many Christians fall into the trap of bringing our culture's values into our attempts to observe a Sabbath. We so easily forget the core meaning of the Sabbath—stopping and resting—that we end up turning our observance of it into one more thing to achieve! *Simple* is a great word to describe the ideal activities for the Sabbath. As soon as we start working too hard to achieve anything on the Sabbath, we've violated the central idea of the day.

I spend my Sabbath-time focusing on the beauty of the world God made and the good gifts he's given me in the previous week. Prayers of thankfulness are appropriate. While I don't try to be “hyper-spiritual” all day, I've discovered a little thought discipline goes a long way toward giving me a day that's restful and rejuvenating.

Take the Day Off

In the Ten Commandments, the Israelites are commanded to keep the Sabbath day holy, or separate, from the other weekdays. The marker of that holiness is the absence of work. But the Old Testament doesn't give many specifics about what constitutes work. One of the few clear commands forbids lighting a fire (Exodus 35:3). This mandate assured that daughters, wives, and female servants wouldn't be expected to cook. The Sabbath granted rest to everyone, even the women who labored the other six days of the week. In our time, what's the equivalent of “lighting a fire”? What are those actions that send *us* into work mode?

For many people, being outside on the Sabbath—walking, riding bikes, flying kites, sitting on a park bench—helps them feel closer to God. Many Christians benefit from some silent time on their Sabbath day. Some of the “work” from which we need a rest is mental. A woman I know tries to avoid worry on the Sabbath. Similarly, as a person who's disliked my body for as long as I can remember, I attempt to keep my Sabbaths free from obsessing about the way I look.

My husband and I have received many gifts from our commitment to honor the Sabbath: a day to spend with our children—and each other—without needing to get something done. A day free of multitasking. A day free of striving for perfection and productivity. A day to rest in God's goodness. Over the years, these gifts have continued to bless us and grant us glorious freedom in Christ.

—LYNNE M. BAAB; excerpted from our sister publication TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN, © 2005 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit TodaysChristianWoman.com.

Discuss

1. Describe a positive experience you have had with resting on the Sabbath.
2. How would you benefit by observing a Sabbath? How would your family benefit?
3. What actions or activities typically send you into “work mode?” Can you avoid them on the Sabbath?



The Small-Group Leader as Spiritual Guide

A step-by-step approach to guiding your group toward spiritual maturity

1 Corinthians 11:1

Perhaps the most exciting and intimidating role a small-group leader may play in the lives of small-group participants is that of “spiritual guide.” The excitement lies in being midwife to another’s insight and mentor to another’s mission. The intimidation lies in the sheer terror that someone might actually listen to you, follow your advice, and stake their future on your perceptions. There is a fine line between authenticity and ego. Any sensible Christian will fear to cross it. Any faithful Christian must take the risk.

In my experience, there are three ways small-group leaders can be trained to be spiritual guides:

Embed

First, small-group leaders embed the core values, bedrock beliefs, biblical vision, and key mission that together form the DNA of the spiritual organism of which the small group is one cellular unit. “Embedding” means that the spiritual guide uses this DNA as the primary vehicle of accountability for small-group behavior.

Whenever the group meets, the leader asks, “In the time since we last gathered, has any person done anything—intentionally or unintentionally—in the midst of their lifestyle to contradict our shared values, beliefs, vision, or mission?” Given the sinful nature of human beings (including the spiritual guide), every person from time to time must confess this breach in predictable positive behavior. The leader gathers the group to heal, accept, and then covenant with each person to never do it again.

This act of accountability is like holding a compass before a group of explorers. It shows true north. More importantly, it cements the trust each explorer has in the other for mutual support amid the struggles of the journey. And most importantly, this absolute trust provides self-esteem in the heart of each small-group participant that helps them believe they are “winners” whether or not the group succeeds or fails in any particular team project.

Model

Second, small-group leaders model the spiritual life. The spiritual life is a very specific habit of Christian behavior that goes beyond any particular tactic of Bible study, prayer, conversation, or service. It is not a skill that can be taught or a program that can be replicated.

The spiritual life is a circular movement from radical humility before the unpredictable and incomprehensible Holy, to brooding reflection on the implications of faithfulness, to compassionate outreach toward foreign micro-cultures. In turn, this process raises questions about self, relationships, and God that one never asked before, and it forces the Christian to stand naked once again before the unpredictable and incomprehensible Holy.

This cycle can be lived out through many tactics, across every professional occupation, through every cultural context, and in the midst of any personal lifestyle. It is what holds together the mobility and diversity of experience that is the norm of postmodern small-group participants in a thread of purpose—just as it was the continuity of integrity that allowed medieval monastics to alternately lead crusades and copy manuscripts by candlelight, or rule kingdoms and sit all alone in caves.

Coach

Finally, small-group leaders coach the faith formation of small-group participants. In my book *Christian Chaos*, I briefly describe the “faith formation flow” that leaders nurture over the timeline of any small group:

- **From covenant to curiosity.** Most small groups bond around a shared enthusiasm or affinity. The temptation is to simply enjoy that affinity with little motivation to discipline oneself to go deeper in the “why” and “whither” of our relationships and passions. The small-group leader guides the group by arousing curiosity. Point out anomalies and patterns in behavior and ideas. Cast glances at the

SOUL CARE

motivations, assumptions, goals, and paradoxes of life. Opportunistically seize upon life struggles, gratuitous evil, and unexplainable grace to arouse a passion for insight and answers.

- **From curiosity to Bible awareness.** Most small-group participants exaggerate, even to themselves, the extent to which they know anything about Christian faith. They are merely opinionated. The more their curiosity is aroused, the more the consternation grows. The sheer volume of applied learning is overwhelming. It's not just information, but application. The small-group leader coaches participants to learn key Biblical stories, metaphors, verses, and ideas—then work them into the fabric of daily life.
- **From Bible awareness to trust.** Ironically, greater Bible awareness all too easily plateaus the spiritual growth of small-group participants! A false confidence is created—a disguised egotism. It is revealed to the small-group leader as participants begin to compete with each other, showing off their database of learning or posturing about their faith. The leader guides the group to trust one another with their feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, or imperfection.
- **From trust to questioning.** As the small-group leader creates an environment of trust that replaces “one-upmanship” with acceptance, participants finally penetrate the depths of their personal anxiety and spiritual yearning. They ask the *real* questions about life, death, good, evil, God, temptation, and so on that have haunted them from the beginning. Note that the spiritual guide does not necessarily *answer* their questions, but rather helps them to wrestle with their questions with integrity and hope.
- **From questioning to action.** The goal of the small-group leader as spiritual guide is not to lead participants from questioning to certainty, but from questioning to *risk*. The answers are to be found in the activity of mission itself, rather than in passive introspection. Giving life away in radical charity and service helps participants live in the midst of mysteries without resignation. The spiritual guide inspires, instills, or enables the discovery of *courage*.
- **From action to holy discontent.** As a small group nears the end of its covenant time together, the journey from finding new life to giving life away to others appropriately ends by leaving the maturing participants once again ill at ease. Questions answered only raise more questions. Beneficial service reveals an even larger human need. The more one knows, the more one discerns one's ignorance. The small-group leader as spiritual guide needs to fan this discontent. After all, the point of group life is *growth*, not personal satisfaction or group hugs. And the growth that is intended is the growth of God's mission, for which the personal growth of the individual is only a step along the way.
- **From discontent to covenant again.** The small-group leader provides each participant with a sense of *trajectory*. “Try this.” “Explore that.” “Partner with these people.” “Talk to those people.” Remind participants that what really made all their growth possible was partnership with others. Spiritual guides are only temporary companions along the way, not gurus to whom small-group participants will return over and over again. That truly would cross the fine line between authenticity and ego. Hand off the role of spiritual leadership to others, and God will provide a new set of companions to mentor along the way.

In order to become a spiritual guide, the small-group leader must surrender to spiritual guidance. This mentor might be a pastor, staff person, volunteer, elder, or any number of leaders in or beyond the church. I have known the spiritual guides of spiritual guides to be 90 years old and 16 years old, male or female, and living some of the most unexpected lifestyles. Seek them out. Shadow their movements. Expect no less and no more of yourself than you expect and communicate to your small group.

—TOM BANDY; © 2003 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. Is our small group a place of spiritual growth? If not, where can we improve most?
2. Do I effectively hold my group members accountable to the original vision and values of the group?
3. Which stage of the “faith formation flow” is our group currently operating in?



The Accountability Factor

An effective way to move beyond the limits of individual human discipline

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

When it comes to spiritual formation, there are times when individual human discipline is not enough. As a small-group leader, however, you can introduce the accountability factor. Just as students study harder when a test is coming up, most people are more likely to stick with a prescribed program for spiritual growth if they know they will be held accountable. Of course, one style of accountability doesn't fit everyone. Here are some suggestions to start developing a commitment to accountability in your group.

Keep a Journal

This works well for those who want to spend more time reading God's Word. In the same way that keeping a record of food consumed each day can help establish healthy eating habits, so tracking your daily consumption of the Bible within the accountability of a group can spur you on to a regular routine of devotional reading.

This works best when all members of the group follow a pre-determined reading schedule. As you read each passage, simply check it off on the sheet and report your progress to the group each meeting. For a more aggressive regimen, select a guide that requires you to read the entire Bible in one year.

Promote Teamwork

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" As a leader, you can promote the buddy system in your small group by soliciting another person to help you achieve a particular goal. For example, you might say, "I'd like to cut down on the time I spend watching television. Would someone volunteer to help me keep myself in check?"

After you have introduced the idea of teamwork, encourage other group members to form partnerships to help each other modify behavior. Keep the concept in mind and promote it anytime an opportunity arises. When someone makes a prayer request, ask for a volunteer to share the burden. Encourage the two people to keep in contact until the issue is resolved. Two people who have the same goal make ideal accountability partners. In some cases, it is advisable to match someone struggling with a bad habit or an addiction with someone who has overcome a similar problem.

Plan a Group Project

If it is feasible with your particular group members, a shared project is a great way to promote spiritual accountability. I recommend allowing your group members to choose the activity. Here are some suggestions:

- Read a challenging book at the same pace.
- Call, visit, or send a card to a shut-in each week.
- Call another member of the group and pray together each week.
- Each month, put someone who needs the Lord on a prayer list. Ask each member to pray everyday for the salvation of that person.

Find ways to check up on the performance of group members, whatever project you choose. Even asking for a show of hands of those who carried out their commitments will be effective. You might ask members to form groups of two or more to discuss the activities of the week, or you may periodically ask someone to report to the entire group.

—ESTHER M. BAILEY; © 2003 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. In general, are the members of our group open about their lives, or more private?
2. Describe a positive experience you have had regarding group accountability. How could this be adapted to your present group?
3. How could accountability be incorporated into the routines and practices our group has already adopted?



The Lost Art of Having a Buddy

Why life-giving friendship is foundational to soul care

Proverbs 18:24

A buddy of mine ordered grits for breakfast. Paul was from the North and had never enjoyed that particular delicacy. He asked the waitress, “Can you please tell me what a grit is?” I smiled quietly on the outside, but was roaring with laughter on the inside as the waitress chuckled and said, “Honey, there’s no such thing as a grit. Grits come in community.”

People, like grits, are best in community, not in isolation. John Donne said the same thing when he penned the powerful words, “No man is an island, entire of itself.”⁴ Consider these facts from the *Wall Street Journal*:

- In a study of 2,800 men and women older than 65, those who had more friends had fewer health problems—and they recovered faster.
- Researchers at Yale University surveyed death rates among 10,000 older adults with different degrees of social contacts. They concluded that having friends reduced the risk of death by half over their five-year study.
- In another study of the health of 6,800 adults in Alameda County, California, it was determined that, among older adults, friendship played a more important role in longevity than did having a living spouse.

Yet the art of having a “buddy” seems to be less common today. Having a close friend is life-giving, yet our culture devalues interpersonal commitments of all kinds—especially friendship. E-mail and the internet have contributed to this disconnection. E-mails, however frequent and newsy, are not the same as a lingering conversation and a deep interpersonal connection.

Part of the problem is that we have become oriented to round-the-clock production. It’s hard for people to be spontaneous with others. Recently, my wife and I tried to find a night when we could socialize with two other couples. It took three months to find a date that worked for everyone. Another friend was planning a 40th birthday bash and sent out invitations a month ahead of time. The party had to be rescheduled because there were too many time conflicts. An event that happens once in a lifetime was moved to accommodate everyone’s busyness! We really need to examine that level of life frenzy.

Human beings were created to live in connection, not isolation. More than 50 times in the New Testament, Scripture addresses how we are to relate with some form of the words translated “one another.” The Bible calls God’s people to pray for, love, encourage, accept, teach, and serve one another. Christians are to bear one another’s burdens. These “one another” passages are more plentiful than instructions to evangelize.

Spirituality exists within community. Evidently, God saw this as a basic human need and made sure that we had lots of reinforcement in the Bible about friendship and community. Something spiritual happens when we are together.

Jesus said, “When two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there” (Matthew 18:20, *The Message*). So friendship is a mandate, even if it requires us to swim against the current. And because friendship is a gift of God, it’s worth the effort to have a real buddy. It is part of soul care to be a friend and enjoy friendship.

—STEPHEN W. SMITH; excerpted from *Embracing Soul Care* (Kregel Publishers, 2006). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. What are some barriers to friendship in your life?
2. What defines a “buddy” in your experience? How do people find one?
3. How can I improve at being a buddy to others in my circle of influence?



Safety in Numbers

5 steps to developing healthy community experiences

Hebrews 10:25

How do we develop healthy community experiences that birth the learning and growth for which each of us longs as Christ's disciples-in-process? Here are five steps.

1. Develop a Safe Place to Share

By far the best environment for faith development comes when our faith is most challenged. It is in the places where we wrestle with the truths of God's Word, ask our hardest questions, and seek prayerfully for direction and support that we become empowered to go forth into the world to love and serve Christ. Where would we be if we didn't have family, friends, mentors, and peers with whom to learn and grow throughout our lives as children, youth, and adults?

Since we don't outgrow the need for learning, this lifelong pursuit after holiness demands that we maintain a safe place to share our life story. In our sharing of this story, we rediscover how God is present to care for our every need and leads us deeper into the fulfillment of his longing for us as his children.

Finding a safe place to share our story requires that we be transparent with one another and learn to hold in confidence all information shared with us. If confidentiality and trust are breached, then community begins to deteriorate. In my small-group experiences, I have learned to trust that my friends will not abuse the information I share with them. I've taken the risk to share, and the fruit of strong community relationships has deeply enriched my personal life and growth. How about you?

2. Develop a Safe Place to Pray

The health of every effective community-group experience is based on the centrality of the Word of God, a dependence on the Spirit of God, and a commitment to share in the prayers of the people of God. Prayer is one of the most important ingredients of spiritual growth for every healthy disciple.

In one of my community groups, we share in reading and praying through the same devotional—Rueben Job and Norman Shawchuck's *A Guide to Prayer*. When we are unable to meet together, we e-mail each other comments about what we're reading that week and how certain thoughts and prayers bring one another to mind. Then, when we are together, the richness of our fellowship is enhanced by this common prayer experience.

3. Develop a Safe Place to Process

We learn so much when we are together in community, sharing common experiences and being stretched in new areas of life and service. Jesus and his disciples shared many intimate moments together, such as the lakeside breakfast in John 21. As a result, the disciples found a safe place to ask their questions and listen to wise truths at the feet of the Master.

If it weren't for the many groups I have had the privilege of leading or joining over the years, I'm confident my spiritual depth would be far shallower than it is today. Processing important information, sharing the journey of life with one another, making important vocational decisions, determining family priorities, working through significant theological truths, praying together, and holding one another accountable to grow and learn are just a sampling of the fruit that has emerged. I'm committed to this process and look forward to how God will use the lives of other healthy disciples to assist me in my growth. How about you?

4. Develop a Safe Place to Care

A safe place to care for one another grows out of understanding each other's needs and being there for each other during times of both struggle and joy. Ruth and I will never forget the times when community members were there for us during the 12 surgeries our son, Nathan, has experienced over the past 17 years. We'll never forget the meals, baby-sitting, flowers, phone calls, or prayers of the saints. This is the fruit of healthy community, and it's something we all long to experience.

SOUL CARE

Tangible signs of care come in the form of meals, financial assistance, acts of mercy, and meeting specific needs. Intangible gifts of love are embodied in grace-giving, joy-sharing, and unconditional expressions of support. True love within community is a caring love for another person no matter what that person may say or do to you. When we are living in vital community with fellow believers, the acts of love come naturally, freely, and generously from the heart. They are a genuine reflection of our love for Christ and his bride, the church.

5. Develop a Safe Place to Grow

The disciples were always “on the grow.” They were on the pathway of growth, becoming healthy disciples each day they traversed the Holy Land with Jesus. The book of Acts tells us how the early church multiplied beyond itself and began to conquer the world with the life-changing message of Jesus. The goal of the first small group was growth, and that goal should be ours, as well.

Growth often requires change. In order for us to experience genuine growth, we may have to say some fond farewells, welcome new members into our community, and even divide so that we can multiply our effectiveness. In addition, we don’t grow as individual disciples by staying in the same place spiritually—we, too, must always be “on the grow.”

As seasons of our life experience change, so also do groups within the Christian community. Often we don’t embrace such changes, and we long for the “glory days” when things stayed relatively the same and we knew everyone in the group intimately. Yet we must be prepared for such transitions. When proactively handled, leaders and members of small groups experience the richness of the here and now while anticipating what’s yet to come.

Changes in the composition of our community can actually enhance our lives and add color and flavor to our learning and growth in Christ. Celebrate the community of which you are currently a part, and look forward to new community being forged in the days ahead. You won’t be disappointed if you wait with faith-filled, open, outstretched arms to receive from Christ and his people every new season of this journey we call *life*.

—STEPHEN MACCHIA; excerpted from *Becoming a Healthy Disciple* (Baker, 2004). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. Describe a time when you were part of a safe community. How did that community affect your life?
2. Which of the five steps has our group developed well?
3. In which steps does our group have significant room for improvement?



Further Exploration

Books and resources to equip church leaders for better communication

SmallGroups.com. Small-group training and curriculum from Christianity Today International.

- “Spiritual Care” Training Theme and Power Point
- “Spiritual Formation” Training Theme and Power Point
- “Creating Community” Training Theme and Power Point
- “Mentoring” Training Theme and Power Point
- “Go Deeper with God” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Intentional Shepherding” Practical Ministry Skills

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Becoming a Healthy Disciple by *Stephen Macchia*. This book outlines ten traits that will help you grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ in today’s world (Baker Books, 2004; ISBN 978-0801091414).

Discovering Soul Care by *Mindy Caliguire*. A simple guide to maintaining or recovering the health of your soul (InterVarsity Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0830835096).

Eat this Book by *Eugene Peterson*. The second part of Peterson’s momentous five-volume work on spiritual theology, this book challenges Christians approach Scripture in a new way (Eerdman’s, 2006; ISBN 978-0802829481).

Embracing Soul Care by *Stephen W. Smith*. This book is about slowing down, stepping outside the chaos of our lives, and entrusting God with the care of our souls (Kregel Publications 2006; ISBN 978-0825436702).

Spiritual Formation for Christian Leaders by *Donald Demaray and Reginald Johnson*. This book is full of richly illustrated life lessons that will guide and shape spiritual formation for Christian leaders (Abingdon Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0687495047).