

COMPREHENSIVE GUIDELINES FOR FAITHFULNESS GROUPS

*revised by Marcelle Martin, Laura Melly & Friends
from the Peer Group Guidelines of Shalem Institute*

PURPOSE:

- The purpose of the Faithfulness group meetings is to help pay attention to God's presence and activity in the life of Friends who are seeking to faithfully follow divine guidance in service, witness, carrying out a ministry, or following a leading. Faithfulness Groups provide ongoing support, help with discernment, and spiritual accountability for the members of the group.
- During a typical two-hour session, two people will each be the focus of the group for about one hour. Each focus person presents something about recent leadings, efforts or struggles to be faithful.
- The role of the group is to prayerfully listen and, as prompted by the Spirit, to ask questions after a presentation is over that can help the presenter explore more deeply their relationship to, awareness of, and response to the Divine in carrying out their service, witness, or ministry.
- This process is a form of spiritual nurture for the presenter, as well as an ongoing committee for clearness and accountability. Ideally, the group meets on an ongoing basis. In rotation, each member has a regular opportunity to be the focus of the group's prayerful attention.

To "listen" another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another. -- Douglas Steere

GROUP ATMOSPHERE: HOLY ACCOMPANIMENT

Group meetings should be conducted with a prayerful, reverent, contemplative attitude: a relaxed, yet very attentive listening to one another and to each member's own inner responses, looking for the presence of the Spirit in what is happening moment-by-moment. The Faithfulness group is a practice of holy accompaniment. During meetings we practice attentiveness to God together, with the intention of helping one another be attentive to the Divine while carrying out a ministry. This necessitates our willingness to refrain from posing questions too quickly or in a forced manner, instead each of us waits to sense and respond to the Spirit's movement, allowing questions to surface gently. Ample time for silence during the discussion is needed and helpful.

When the prayerful and contemplative atmosphere of the group slides into problem solving, advice giving, analysis, criticism, or tangential discussions, it is important to recall that our priority is listening for the Divine and to return our 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 correction might be needed, such as, "I wonder if we're staying focused here," or "Could we pause for a few moments of silence at this point?" The goal for each member is to gently try to hear and respond to God's presence, the movement of the Spirit, within the meeting of the group itself.

CONTENT OF THE MEETINGS:

Focus

Each meeting should be carefully centered around experiences and concerns relating specifically to the involvement of the presenter in their effort to be faithful, and should focus on how the prayer experience and faith life of the presenter affects this.

The group, in an attitude of open, humble, and holy accompaniment, should keep the focus on the PRESENTER'S spiritual concerns, experiences, feelings, faith, blocks, blind spots, gifts, discernment, confidence, and confusion in the work of faithfulness (including preparation for it and reflection upon it afterward.) It is helpful for the presenter to ask the group for help with his or her own reflections about specific spiritual concerns, yet to avoid seeking advice or suggestions. The focus should not be upon those ministered to, except as it serves to shed light on the presenter's condition, discernment, and faithfulness. Discussion of those ministered to and problem solving should be kept to a minimum, and should never be allowed to eclipse the focus on the spiritual awareness of the presenter. Nor should it distract the group from its immediate, moment-by-moment attentiveness to the Divine.

Presentations

Each presenter has fifteen minutes to tell about specific incidents, inner movements, and concerns related to their efforts to be faithful. The presentation can include a specific incident, interaction, or event, or a description of the leading, witness, or ministry as it has developed over time. It could be a follow-up of 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 his or her prayer in relationship to the ministry.

Presentations should include ONLY enough information about those ministered to as is needed to provide adequate understanding of the presenter's experience of that relationship.

Questions of Clarification

After a presentation, the convener asks if there are any necessary, brief, factual questions of clarification. Only ask this sort of question if the presentation was not clear on some essential point, and some quick clarification is required in order to understand the situation. The time needed for this clarification is subtracted from the time for deeper questions and exploration. Do not try to satisfy curiosity about a situation. It is not necessary for group members to fully understand a situation in order to be helpful to the presenter. Only ask clarification questions that help the group serve the presenter's clarity.

Questions and Deeper Exploration

After any brief questions of clarification, the group settles into a period of silent prayer and worship, out of which deeper questions for the focus person may be posed. These questions, prompted by the Spirit, are intended to help the presenter focus on what is happening in their relationship with God in their efforts to be faithful. It is not necessary for group members to ask questions for the sake of asking questions. No straining or striving for questions 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 what may feel like a void.

The assumption is that faithfulness is aided by helping to make conscious, and clear away, any blocks within the presenter so that she or he can be 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 help, learning, critique, and prayer will be expressed or revealed inwardly, 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 group. Members are encouraged to stay in a humble, reverent attitude toward the work of the Spirit in the presenter.

Anonymity of those served may need to be preserved; if there are, for instance, aspects of the service or ministry that are confidential. It may be necessary to create a fictional name and to disguise some identifying details about those served. Whatever is shared in the Faithfulness group is confidential.

THE BENEFITS OF ONGOING FAITHFULNESS GROUPS

In the beginning, as group members learn the discipline of this format, the Faithfulness group practice can feel awkward; this is natural. Group members can feel that disclosure of their spiritual condition and the challenges they face is a tender and uncomfortable experience. It may be helpful to consider the Faithfulness group experience as a meeting for worship *with attention to faithfulness*. Listening closely and reverently is foundational to the practice. It is helpful for group members, then, to apply tests of discernment to questions that may occur to them, just as they would in discerning and testing the source when they feel a prompting to offer vocal ministry in a meeting for worship.

Groups that meet over a period of time come to know each other's call to, and experiences of, ministry—and learn to accompany each other into deeper realms of faithfulness. As trust and intimacy grow among the members, they will feel themselves, like experienced ensemble musicians, better able to accompany one another. Members of long-term groups report that their ability to discern and follow the promptings of the Spirit grows and leads them to increasing faith and profound Love.

ROLE OF CONVENERS: It is the responsibility of the convener to open and close each meeting, to lead the worship/prayer time, to keep time carefully according to the schedule, to moderate the discussion as needed, and to attend to whether the discussion is following the intent, atmosphere and attitude described in these guidelines. (The latter is the responsibility of all, but it is helpful if the convener is consciously attentive to this.) It is recommended that the convener remind the group at the beginning that the focus should be more on the presenter than on those served, and that the basic intent of the meeting is to be open and responsive to the Spirit.

The SCHEDULE for each meeting should be approximately as follows:

1. OPENING-(convener reminds group about intended focus and attitude)
2. OPENING WORSHIP--5 MINUTES, led by convener
3. FIRST PRESENTATION--UP TO 15 MINUTES (Group listens silently to the presentation; at the end the presenter can be asked to speak about their prayer in relationship to the ministry if this has not yet been mentioned.)
4. BRIEF FACTUAL QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION (IF NECESSARY)
5. SILENT PRAYER, REFLECTION--2 minutes
6. DEEPER QUESTIONS AND EXPLORATION--35 MINUTES
7. BREAK--5 MINUTES
8. SECOND PRESENTATION--UP TO 15 MINUTES
9. BRIEF FACTUAL QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION (IF NECESSARY)
10. SILENT PRAYER, REFLECTION--2 minutes
11. DEEPER QUESTIONS AND EXPLORATION--35 MINUTES
12. PROCESS OF MEETING--5 MINUTES (see guidelines below)
13. CLOSING WORSHIP--2 TO 5 MINUTES
14. CLOSE

EVALUATING AND PROCESSING THE FAITHFULNESS GROUP MEETING

After both presentations are finished, and just before closing the meeting, the convener asks the group to reflect on the Faithfulness group meeting, such as the sense of prayerful presence within the group, noting what facilitated that or seemed to get in the way. Was there, for instance, a sense of spiritual discernment happening for the presenter in the group, from the standpoint of the presenter and group members? Questions such as the following might be helpful:

1. HOW WELL DID WE STAY FOCUSED ON THE PRESENTER AND THE PRESENTER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD? (as opposed to focusing on those ministered to?)
2. ANY SPECIAL PLACES WHERE WE SEEMED TO BE OFF TRACK? (i.e. too much problem-solving, overly analytical, not attentive to the Spirit, group members telling their own stories, etc.)
3. WHAT WAS THE QUALITY OF SILENCE AND ATTENTION TO GOD?
4. DID WE ALL REMAIN FAITHFUL TO THE INNER GUIDE?
5. HOW WAS GOD ABLE TO WORK THROUGH US AS A TEAM?

The presenter might share her/his perceptions of the discussion, including anything that seemed to be especially on target or a particular "nudge of grace" in the presence or words of others.

Conveners and presenters should be scheduled on a rotating basis, with one convener and two presenters for a two-hour meeting. One person should not serve as both convener and presenter during a given meeting.

SOME QUESTIONS OF REFLECTION FOR THE FAITHFULNESS GROUP

These questions relate to the focus of the Faithfulness group practice: the attempt to be faithful in daily life, and in service or witness, in following a leading, or in the carrying out a ministry. They are offered to help groups become sensitive to a wide range of issues that may affect the group members' abilities to serve faithfully. They are useful tools for reflection when preparing to be a presenter. During a session, do not attempt to seek answers to these questions in an analytical way.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PRAYER FOR THE PRESENTER:

How does the presenter pray about the call to faithfulness, or about particular situations or contexts for their service, witness, leading, or ministry? How do they pray about those served? What are the presenter's experiences and assumptions about what prayer is, how it happens, what power it has?

QUESTIONS ABOUT DISCERNMENT:

How much freedom does the presenter have in responding to the Spirit in those served? What evidence does the presenter give of being specifically aware of the workings of grace or the Spirit in the life of those served?

What is the presenter's degree of trust in God as contrasted with reliance upon his or her own personal competence and willful effort? How surrendered is the presenter? Is this a surrender to God? To self? To the one(s) ministered to? To the expectations of others? What kind and degree of surrender does the presenter encourage in others?

Is the presenter willing to wait for a clear leading before acting, or might they be running ahead of the Guide?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PRESENTER:

Is the presenter hearing or following a new call or leading, or have they been following one for a while? How does this affect the presenter's sense of themselves, of God's presence, and of those served?

What is the nature or quality of the presenter's moment-by-moment awareness of or attention to God while attempting to be faithful? What seems to most help or hinder the presenter's attentiveness to God? How does the presenter seek divine help in addressing the impediments to faithfulness?

How well can the presenter address or confront difficult issues? Can the presenter say the necessary "hard things?"

What is the nature of the presenter's love/compassion in relationship? Is it personal? Does it feel transcendent? How deeply can the presenter touch the heart of those served, seeing through surface images and emotions to the Light, or God's image in others?

ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS:

Has the presenter followed-up on the spiritual guidance, nudges and leadings they have received? If not, what is impeding their faithfulness? How is the presenter staying true to spiritual priorities and commitments?

Is the presenter willing to speak truth in difficult situations, when asked to do so?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR THE FAITHFULNESS GROUP

The following are examples of questions that might help a focus person look more deeply at how the Spirit is at work within them in their efforts to be faithful and open up more fully to Divine love and guidance. Notice what language the focus person uses to describe their experience of the Holy, and use that language as appropriate (i.e. where the following questions use the word *God*, the focus person may have used words such as *Spirit, the Light, Christ, or Jesus*.) Ask questions that are open, that invite the presenter to deeper exploration. Faithfulness group session will have far fewer questions and include generous space for the presenter to reflect and answer while the group actively listens.

When you pray about this, what comes to you?

What is your sense of how God is with you in this matter?

What is your sense of how God is with you in this moment, right now?

What happens when you show ___*___ to God? (* = your fear, confusion, anger, doubt, conflict, hope, desire, joy, etc.) [Allow time in the moment for this to happen inwardly.]

Can you say more about that experience you described?

How was God present with you in that moment?

Have you received any nudges, signs, dreams, or intuitions in relation to this?

What guidance are you receiving?

Is there an image (or a Bible passage or story, metaphor, memory, etc.) that comes to you when you consider or pray about this?

Is there something you're resisting?

What are you afraid might happen?

What do you do with your fear?

Do you notice any recurring pattern arising in yourself around this? Any prejudice or bias?

Where in your body do you feel tension when you consider this?

Do you sense God inviting you to practice patience (or exercise leadership, surrender control, grow in compassion, relinquish privilege, or forgive someone) in this situation?

Are you being invited to step out of an old pattern here?

In relation to this, are you becoming more aware of something, or sensitive in a new way?

What new way of being are you being invited to step into?

What help do you require?

Are you open to help? Are you asking for the help you need?

Are you letting in the love that's coming toward you? Can you allow it in more?

When you allow yourself to trust the presence and activity of God, how do you see this situation?

Do you have a vision of what you're being called into now?

If you fully trusted the presence and activity of God in this matter, what action would you take next?

Is there anything you need to say to God right now?

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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 www.Shalem.org

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