

Soul Groups for Spiritual Formation- Ascot Vale Uniting Church

Introduction:

Everyone has a soul and everyone has a story to tell. We come together to tell our life stories and to listen. In so doing we share the meanings that we make, the feelings that we have and the destiny for which we strive.

Together and alone, our grounded souls reach out to a greater Creative Power, or God, within us and throughout all of Life. We name this power *Spirit*. *We call this movement spiritual formation.*

Soul Groups provide the context and support for our spiritual formation.

Through spiritual formation we know the larger story of hope, love and trust, all spiritual energies, and they begin to shape us.

We come together through ‘*Soul Groups*’ to form what we call, *covenant relationships*. *Soul Groups provide the context and process for spiritual formation. Covenant relationships are at it's heart.*

A Covenant

A promise to bless in which two or more people treat each other as equals, and pledge mind, body and soul to care for each other's good.

“Respect, dignity, and a new vision of God and of the human possibility.”

Meaning and History

In God's unconditional love, God established a covenant with people down through the ages. It has signified what Eternal Life, what God does: *blessing and deliverance*. It has meant freedom from want, freedom from tyranny, freedom from fear. A covenant relationship between people is based on that unconditional love. And it brings *blessing and deliverance*.

Where there is God's Spirit- God's creative energy-within and between people, there is blessing and deliverance. God made a covenant with Abraham saying:

“I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...in you all the families of the earth shall find blessing.” (Gen. 12: 2,3)

Freedom and Blessing

By making a covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless his descendants and the rest of the world. Throughout history with God's help people strive to set themselves free; freedom to thrive and to enjoy life's basic gifts: land, food, and peace.

The great prophets of all time disturbed the status quo so that life's blessings could be shared by the many, not just the few.

“This is the covenant that I will make...no longer shall they say to each other, “know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 31: 33, 34)

Jesus and Paul, Prophets and Mystics

The New Testament itself means “new covenant”; and it interprets the creative work of Jesus Christ as bringing this new covenant into being through his body, mind and soul. Jesus spoke of the inner and outer expression of God's unconditional love:

“The kingdom of God is within you and among you.”(Luke 17: 21)

Paul the Apostle spoke of what he had experienced, the transformative power of blessing and deliverance based on unconditional love, in *1 Corinthians 13*. He encouraged his followers therefore to:

*“Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.”
(1 Cor. 14: 1)*

A New Kind of Power

An experience of a covenant relationship, with God, and one with another, is about a different kind of power. Not the power of domination or power over, but the spiritual power of reverence for another, for oneself and for life. This in itself is a kind of blessing and deliverance because it builds trust and pride and hope between people- essential ingredients by which a people *deliver themselves*.

“They [Christians] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...

...all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...

...day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”
(Acts 5: 41, 44, 47)

Covenant relationships & groups during the industrial revolution- John Wesley (1703-91)

Wesley believed in the necessity of covenant groups for *spiritual growth*. He said: “Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: is there Christian fellowship there? Rather are not the bulk of parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What communion in spiritual things? What watching over each other’s souls? What bearing of one another’s burdens?”

Wesley saw covenant groups as the genius of early Christianity. He believed they offered a more intense and personal encounter of faith and grace within a context of mutual support, love and care.

Role and Size: much of the success and effectiveness of the covenant groups resulted from the high sense of responsibility each member assumed for every other member and for the group as a whole.

It was in the covenant groups, groups of four or five persons, “*where people who were faceless and worthless in the streets outside the chapel found respect, dignity, and a new vision of God and of the human possibility.*”

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation is to participate in the ultimate mystery: the Eternal Creative Life within you and around you. Together and alone our grounded souls reach out to this greater Creative Life, God, which we name as *Spirit*.

We call this movement spiritual formation.

Covenant relationships are at the heart of our spiritual formation. In this we know the larger story of hope, love and trust, all spiritual energies, and they begin to shape us.

Through *spiritual practices* we intentionally join our lives to the larger Creative Life and let it inform and re-create us.

Spiritual practices may include but are not limited to, the *inward disciplines*: meditation and prayer, fasting, and Bible study;
the *outward disciplines*: acts of compassion and creativity, simplicity and commitment; solitude and service, and participation in nature;
the *corporate disciplines*: worship and participating in the sacraments, celebration and Christian fellowship.

Steps in Christian Spiritual Formation

1. Separation: admitted that our lives had become unmanageable or out of control. We were living in a state of separation from our deeper and better nature in union with the *Spirit*. We realised that we can live in greater accord with the ultimate vision of what will come: human alienation, violence and inequality being overcome.
2. Awareness: we came to believe that God accepts us; we learned to trust or have faith in God's acceptance of us. We came to believe that a greater creative power, God's Spirit, could restore us to sanity, and bring our minds and bodies to peace and health. In this power we reclaim for ourselves an authentic inner-directed life.
3. Reunion and deliverance: turning our will and our lives over to the care and love of God as we understood God, especially through the life, teachings and Spirit of Jesus. In addition to the Bible we also look to traditions, to human reason, to our own experience, and to the experiences of others for spiritual insight.
4. The inner look: clearing away whatever clutter may block our awareness of that which is God in us. We examine what helps and what hinders our communion with God the Creator of Life, and of our life. We empty our minds.
5. Incarnation: sought through our spiritual practices to deepen our conscious contact and our intimacy with God. We sought simply knowledge of God's will and purposes for us and for our world, and for courage to carry those out.
6. Making amends: made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, and sought to make amends to those we have wronged. Where we were wrong we promptly admitted it.
7. Improving our character: sought to correct any personal flaws and defects of character. Humbly asked God to help us correct or remove these.
8. Care for the good of others- unconditional love. This includes loving our enemies, and our neighbour; a commitment to non-violence for social change; having reverence for all persons, and caring for the earth and all living systems. It means confronting oppressive forces, and changing social conditions that prevent God from coming home to God-self in others.
9. The blessing: having had a spiritual awakening as a result of our spiritual practices, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our activities. Through our spiritual practices we are continually being and becoming, the person that we want to be and that God would have us be.

Meeting Format

- 1) **Opening:** "Welcome to this Soul Group, my name is..."
- 1.1) **What is a Soul Group? What is spiritual formation?**
(see pgs. 1, and 3, reading definitions out loud is optional)
- 1.2) **Guidelines to Sharing:** (reading this out loud is optional- for the newcomer):
 - Talking or sharing is voluntary. We are not required to speak if we do not want to.
 - This is a time when you may share your thoughts our feelings.
 - We do not 'cross-talk' or interrupt when another person is sharing.
 - While someone is sharing, we do not offer advice or criticism.
 - There will be time after the meeting where group members are welcome to share support and ideas with each other.

- **Confidentiality:** The opinions expressed here were strictly those of the person who gave them. What you heard was spoken in confidence and should be treated as confidential. Keep it within the walls of this room and the confines of your mind. Remember, confidentiality is a core tradition upon which the group depends, and by which our trust in each other flourishes.

Whatever problems you have, there are those among us who have had them too. If you keep an open mind, you will find support. Let us talk to one another and reason things out, but let us not gossip or criticize each other. Instead let the understanding, love and trust grow in each of us through our bond together.

3) **Sharing: Getting current and milestones:**

“At this time, you are welcome to share a brief update on how your week has gone, or how you are feeling today. The *“feelings”* sheet may be useful.

Ask: “How is it with your soul?”

3.1) “Thank you for your brief shares. Is there anybody who is celebrating a *milestone* in their life or spiritual formation, a change in career or relationship, or a new insight about their life?”

4) **Readings:** This is the part of the meeting where we read some literature of our choice, perhaps Biblical or extra-Biblical, like poetry, or all of these. Two to three readings may be sufficient, depending on length and time available.

5) **Sharing: in response to the readings, see guidelines at 1.2 above, or a presentation on one of the steps of spiritual formation may be made:**

Sample Reflection Questions:

- *Is there a word(s), a phrase, or an image in the readings that resonates with you?*
- *What do you resonate with in the reading?*
- *For Bible readings: Note: stories of Jesus’ healing the sick are particularly helpful for devotional time. (“Teaching Godly Play”, Jerome Berryman- the questions below from Berryman might be too simple, they are designed for children, but who knows, maybe simple is better.)*
 - *What part of the reading/story is about you? Why?*
 - *What part of the story is most important to you?*
 - *Who are you in the story?*
 - *What part of the story is difficult or annoying to you?*
 - *Is there any part of the story you could leave out, and still have the story?*

6) **Prayer and Meditation:** *Images or phrases from scripture can be spoken as part of a prayer or meditation.* This is the time for silent or spoken intercessory prayers for each other, and for prayer concerns that group members may have. This can be led by one member of the group or different members can pray for each other. There can be silent prayer, a guided meditation or just silent and relatively unstructured meditation.

7) **Closing:** “Would anyone like to volunteer to...

- Chair the next meeting?
- Make a presentation on one of the steps of your spiritual formation (pgs. 3, 4)?
- Pray for others, or lead a guided meditation at the next meeting?
- Read out the promises?

7.1) **The Promises** (reading this out loud is optional):

“Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7: 7-8)

or,

*“Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive...
let it be done for you according to your faith.” (Matthew 21: 22; 8: 13)*

“If we are painstaking about our spiritual development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the words, “faith, hope and love”, and know them in ourselves. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in others. Self seeking will slip away.

Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic situations will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

*These promises are being fulfilled among us- sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.
They will always materialize if we work for them.”*

or,

“If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5: 17)

or,

*“Blessed are the poor, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what’s right, they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called sons and daughters of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of what’s right, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5: 1-11)*

or,

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit...then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Acts 2: selected verses)

“If we put at the disposal of the Spirit our dedication and discipline, we can live creatively and effectively in the chaos of the present.”

(Howard Thurman, ‘Jesus and the Disinherited’)

7.2) Serenity Prayer: To close the meeting, please share a moment of silence followed by the *serenity prayer*, by Reinhold Niebuhr. Hand holding is optional:

*“God, grant me the serenity,
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.”*

or,

“Abide in me as I abide in you. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you...As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” (John 15: 4, 7, 9)

“May your love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight,” (Philippians 1: 9) and “may the peace of Christ, to which you were called, rule in your heart.” (Colossians 3: 15)

or,

the Lord’s Prayer, or Psalm 23

or,

“May you be strengthened in your soul with power through God’s Spirit. May Christ abide in your heart through faith; may you be grounded in love. May you have the power to comprehend and to know the breadth and length, height and depth of the love of Christ, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3: 14-19)

or,

“Thanks to the power at work within all of us which is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3: 20)

Possible Discussion Questions for Sharing Time or Step Presentations

Spiritual Formation- Steps One, Two and Three:

(‘Separation’, ‘Awareness’, ‘Reunion’)

1. What is your definition of *Spirituality*?
2. What do you want from a *soul group* or a *covenant relationship*? What are you prepared to give?
3. What is your definition of *religion*?
What do you hold to be your *ultimate concern in life*? Has it changed over time?
4. How do you describe or define your *Higher, Creative Power; God, Spirit* ?
5. In what areas of your life do you seek improvement or refinement?
What areas of your life have become unmanageable, out of control, or stressful?
6. What or who has held you back from living an *authentic life*, an inner directed life centred on your own values rather than the values of others?
7. Where are your sources of *faith, hope and love* to be found in this stage of your life?
What has helped you to experience these greater energies in your life?
8. Do you struggle with certain blocks to your *spiritual formation*?
9. How can you make use of Steps One and Two to overcome these spiritual blocks?

10. How does your present work and your career fit with and express who you are?
How can you best offer your gifts to others and to the larger world?

Possible Discussion Questions for Sharing Time or Step Presentations

Spiritual Formation- Step Four: ('The Inner Look')

1. What has dominion over you today? What dominates your thinking each day?
Would you describe these thoughts as expressive of who you really are and want to be, or beneath your worth and dignity as a person?
2. Have you made time today for some 'bliss', to go to a sacred place within yourself, for an activity that is good for your soul?
Have your thoughts today been dominated by occasional, pedestrian concerns, having to do with financial or social pressures?
3. What are your triggers for obsessive thinking? For fear or worry?
What are your triggers for compulsive behaviour?
4. What if anything has proven helpful in alleviating and dealing with these thoughts?
5. How would making use of the Steps of Spiritual Formation help to deal with your obsessive thinking and your anxiety?
6. What aids your hunger and experience of the Creative Life within you and around you?
7. What helps you to better understand yourself and how to cope with your problems?
Who were you with or what were you doing?

Spiritual Formation- Step Seven: ('Improving our Character')

1. What do you fear most? Why? Who or what do you resent, envy or hate?
Which of these feelings drive your behaviour today?
2. How long have you had these feelings and behaviours? When did they begin, and what feelings or situations were you dealing with at the time?
3. When feeling afraid, what or who steadies you and gives you courage?
Is there anyone who shows you some hope, or how to live courageously, or wisely?

Sources

- *12 Step Group literature, Alcoholics Anonymous;*
- *'Disciplines of the Spirit', Howard Thurman;*
- *'Why We Can't Wait', and 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', Martin Luther King Jr.;*
- *'John Wesley's Message Today', Lovett Weems Jr.;*
- *'Original Blessing', Matthew Fox;*
- *'Shaking the Foundations', Paul Tillich;*

- *'An Open Life', Joseph Campbell;*

- *'Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth', Richard J. Foster*

'Soul Groups for Spiritual Formation', author, Rev. Ron W. Rosinsky