

The Spiritual Companions Group

A Design for Nurturing Small Groups for Spiritual Growth in Your Meeting

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A spiritual companions group is a small group that meets regularly to support each person's spiritual journey and to deepen their knowing each other. This piece outlines how a Quaker meeting can organize such groups in their community and provide support for them.

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A Quaker meeting at worship is more than a collection of individuals sitting in expectant openness to the Presence. It is an ongoing community, a unique entity whose character affects the persons who are there. How close and supportive this community is deeply influences the worship as well as the spiritual growth of both individuals and the Meeting as a whole.

Many years ago Quaker monthly meetings easily grew into close-knit communities. Quakers of the same Meeting lived fairly close together, did business with each other, visited and socialized together. Their many contacts with each other outside meeting for worship brought them into companionship, a real Friend-ship. They knew each other in ways both difficult and blessed, and far more deeply than those of us can who only see each other at meeting for worship.

Today many of us find that our Quaker contacts take place primarily at Meeting events. We have good friends who are not Quakers. When we shop, do business, or go to our jobs, we are probably not surrounded by the persons we worship with.

Perhaps we need to examine how well we really know the persons we worship with. Is there opportunity to share the struggles and joys of our spiritual journeys with each other? Do we feel comfortable enough with each other to do so? Are we truly formed into a close, mutually supportive community?

How Do Small Groups Build a Spiritual Home?

For a Meeting to be a true spiritual home, a spiritual belonging place, I believe one needs to belong to at least one small group within the larger community. We need to belong to a group where we will be missed when we are absent and where we feel truly needed.

In a small group for spiritual growth, we strengthen and encourage each other's prayerful listening to the Spirit, we support each other's discernment and ongoing spiritual journey, and, perhaps most important, we know that we are deeply cared for.

Through knowing each other well, we also strengthen our larger community. We deepen the bonds between us. We know of each other's joys and sorrows. We've shared some of the life stories which have helped shape us. Knowing that a few people in the Meeting know us well can deepen our experience of worshipping together.

Of course all Meetings, large and small, already have functioning small groups. The most common are committees. A committee working together for a common purpose can provide some of the benefits named above but is usually too task-focused to provide a time to share our spiritual stories and encourage our continued journeys. There may be a variety of

other groups as well: book discussion groups, social action groups, dinner or lunch groups, prayer or Bible-study groups, journaling groups, and so on. At various times we join them and find that they meet a need. But none of them focus primarily on building a closer bond with each other and supporting our spiritual journeys.

The design I outline below for spiritual companions groups is simple and can be led by the group members themselves or by an outside facilitator who is not a participating member of the group. There are other patterns for spiritual growth groups to choose from. It is good to explore various models and to consider carefully what the goal of the group is before embarking. Once you find a pattern which is a good fit for the participants, it can be adjusted as needed.

What Is a Spiritual Companions Group?

The purpose of a spiritual companions group is to provide support and encouragement for each other on our spiritual journeys. Rather than focusing on the discussion of ideas, our focus is on sharing our own stories. Because this is a riskier sharing than a discussion of ideas, such groups need to be structured carefully and have specific guidelines to follow.

What happens in a group may vary somewhat, but the most important part is allowing each member a time to talk, a time to be the focus person when others simply sit and listen. This is followed by a period of reflective, thoughtful silence out of which arise responses from the other group members.

Membership in such a group is a commitment. Members commit themselves to be present for each session. Dates for meetings should be rearranged when necessary so that everyone can be present. A willingness to speak out about one's own life and a desire to grow closer to God are also part of the group's commitment to each other. Praying for each other is important. A commitment to confidentiality is essential in order for trust to build.

What else happens in the group will vary depending on the group itself. Sometimes a group focuses on

a theme suggested by the facilitator. Some groups spend time sitting in silence. Some write together on a subject and speak out of their journaling experience. Groups may develop a ritual of welcoming or of community celebration.

How to Get a Group Started

The simplest way to begin a spiritual companions group is to find three kindred spirits in your Meeting and invite them to join you in this adventure. Perhaps you have a few people in mind already. Share these pages with them and see if they are interested, if this opportunity comes at the right time for them. You may well find that your need for sharing in a small group is matched by theirs, and they gladly fit time for the group into their lives.

On the other hand, you may find that some of the persons you would most like to join with in a spiritual companions group are not interested or able to do so at this time. Don't be discouraged; there are people for whom this kind of group is a great gift, and you will find them as you keep on searching.

There is great value in beginning with one set of participants trying out the small group experience before extending a Meeting-wide invitation, especially if none of the participants have previous experience. By having a pilot project, you learn what works in your own community.

Before beginning a Meeting-wide project, it may be useful to poll meeting members and attenders on their interest and on the perceived needs of the community. Is a spiritual companions group the kind of experience people are hungry for? Perhaps there is a need for neighborhood groups who get together socially, or perhaps for a book discussion group. You may encourage others to create the kind of group which fits their needs and lives even as you do the same.

Extending the invitation to participate to the whole Meeting naturally creates the need for more decisions. How will you publicize it? Who will be responsible for it? Will there be oversight for this project by one of the Meeting's standing committees? It is a good idea to have the support of the Worship

and Ministry Committee with its concern for the spiritual nurture of the Meeting. Often members of this committee will be among those most interested in forming the “pilot project” group.

Before publicizing the opportunity, it is important to be clear what the groups are meant to be and what they are not meant to be. The persons taking responsibility for the project will receive a lot of questions. They need to have thought carefully about the purpose and shape of the project so as to be ready with answers. A description in the Meeting newsletter or a verbal announcement alone will not suffice.

Perhaps the most important thing to be clear about is the commitment involved. Because of the kind of sharing, the speaking out of one’s own experience, it is essential that participants be consistently present. In a group discussing ideas or books, participants could possibly attend intermittently as it fits into their schedules and energy. Here, however, the kind of sharing that speaks out of one’s own experience increases the trust, vulnerability and closeness of group members. Occasional attendance would hurt the group.

Another aspect of the group that needs to be clear to prospective participants is that it *is* meant to be a group where people share from their own experience. It is a lot more comfortable to talk ideas, to report what one has read or what someone else has said. While a detour into ideas or authors is going to happen occasionally, the group format is designed to give the greatest opening for people to tell their own stories. This kind of deep sharing can be difficult for some people though, at the same time, they may be hungry for the closeness which grows when group members do know each other deeply.

Issues to Decide Before Beginning

1. *Open or closed group.* What if someone wants to join the group after it has been meeting for a while? Quakers are traditionally welcoming and open to all comers. However, it may be more appropriate in a spiritual companions group to form a new group rather than add someone to a group already close knit.

Perhaps there could be specific times for new persons to join a group, a time when the groups re-form and other participants may conclude their involvement in the group.

2. *Frequency of meetings.* Because of the commitment to regular participation, it is important to decide how often the group will meet. Will it be a weekly or a once or twice a month encounter? The disadvantage of monthly meetings is that it takes a longer time to build a deep, close group. However, a group that has grown close in more frequent sessions could change and meet monthly. Perhaps three months of twice a month sessions would be a start-up to a group that wants to meet monthly. The biggest consideration here is the busyness of the lives of the participants.

3. *Ongoing or time-limited groups.* Another issue to be addressed is whether the group will be ongoing or have a specific closure date. The difficulty with ongoing groups is that eventually the group will not fit the lives or spiritual situation of one or more of the participants. Without a clearly outlined way of “resigning,” they may feel very uncomfortable and the others in the group may feel “abandoned.”

People often are more willing to join a group with a definite beginning and ending date. Having an ending date gives those who need to leave a group a comfortable way of doing so. Those who wish to continue may re-form their group with some new members and begin another term. There seem to be clear advantages to forming a group with a specific closure date, especially if there is an opportunity to renew the commitment.

4. *Leadership.* There may be a nonparticipating facilitator. A spiritual companions group can also function well with the participants providing the leadership. Perhaps one participant may be experienced in group leadership and be willing to take on the responsibility for the first month or so; this can be helpful. The simplest way usually is to share the facilitating chore equally around the group.

To ensure that the group stays with its purpose and that everyone has an equal opportunity for sharing, a facilitator needs to refocus the group when necessary. The facilitator needs to be conscious of

time, and perhaps lead the group from one activity to another. If the group has problems, it will be the facilitator's responsibility to address them or to be in touch with those who have oversight of the group.

5. *Size of group.* The number necessary for a viable group varies. Three persons can meet for a group experience, but if one person is not clearly committed the group will falter. If there are too many people, each person has too little time to share and to have others respond. In order to allow each participant a minimum of 20 minutes to be the focus person, and to include a time for opening and closing, a group of six persons will need to meet for more than two hours. More people mean a longer gathering.

One variation that allows for a larger group is to not have each person share each time the group meets. For example, in a group of eight members, four could have a turn for sharing during one session, four the next session. That this pattern works well demonstrates just how rewarding listening and responding to another person can be. It is as fulfilling to listen as it is to have a turn as focus person, and often more so!

6. *Placing participants in groups.* If several groups are being formed at the same time, the project organizer will need to work with others to decide in which group participants will be placed. These are decisions to be made carefully and prayerfully. Male/female ratios in these groups are often skewed in favor of women. It can be thoughtful to ask the men if they would like to have another man in their group or whether being the only male is comfortable for them. If possible, it is good to place each member of a couple in a separate group. While having a mix of backgrounds, ages, and spiritual experience in a group may seem like a good idea, it is most important to consider each person individually, not demographically. It is unavoidable that sometimes the group in which one is placed has more to do with the time one has available than any other factor. Evening or morning, weekday or weekend can be deciding details in group formation.

Issues to Decide as the Group Begins

1. *Length of session.* The length of each session should be discussed and decided, although the initial decision may not be a final one. Sessions have a tendency to stretch out, especially as the members get to know each other more deeply and want to continue their conversations. However, having a closing time is essential so the facilitator can plan for each person to have an equal time to share.

2. *Place of session.* Whether the group meets in a home or in the meetinghouse is another group decision. Meeting in someone's home may increase the hospitable and comfortable ambiance but it may be that no one can provide an uninterrupted space. Being able to meet without interruption is important. For some folks, being a host can be a pleasure; for others, it may feel like a burden to which the group needs to be sensitive.

3. *Time of session.* When the group meets may have been decided by the organizer. In fact, the participants may be placed in a group depending on whether they can meet day, evening, or weekend. If there are several options, group members are fortunate!

4. *Written commitment.* It is often helpful for the group to spell out the commitment they make to each other by writing out a contract. Most important is the confidentiality on which trust rests. The group may take it for granted, but it should be spoken about clearly.

A written commitment may also include frequency of meetings and renewable terms of involvement in the group. Whether written down or not, these are important facts to have settled before the group begins.

Some groups include prayer for each other in their written contract. Prayer for each other grows as knowing each other grows: immeasurably but steadily. When a group starts with a commitment to prayerfully hold each other in the Light, the prayer itself draws them close.

Problems That May Arise

1. *Disappointed expectations.* No matter how carefully one elucidates the purpose of a spiritual companions group, there is always the chance that someone will join expecting something different, perhaps more of a discussion group. Or, another scenario, a spiritual sharing group may gradually develop into more of a discussion group, leaving some persons frustrated and others pleased by the idea exchanges. It is valuable to have an evaluation time (see evaluation questions attached) that can help the group return repeatedly to the “what are we about” theme. A concluding date or a time to renew commitment gives all the members a chance to evaluate whether they are receiving what they need in the group. And those with an interest in discussion of ideas or writings should be encouraged to form a group for that purpose.

2. *Persons inappropriate for groups.* A very difficult problem is the situation when a meeting-wide invitation to join groups nets some participants who are simply unable to function in a group setting. They may be unable to allow others to be the focus of attention and make all comments in reference to themselves. They may have overwhelming problems that tempt the group into becoming a support group for their benefit. They may simply be unwilling to stop talking and listen. Any one of those difficulties can sabotage a small group’s functioning.

Here it is very advantageous to have organizers who are not members of the small group in trouble. The organizers may be able to suggest that a support group focusing on the individual’s difficulties might be of more value to that person than a spiritual companions group. When such a suggestion comes out of a real sense of concern for the individual, it is likely to be well received. For someone who is having difficulty listening and focusing on others, a reminder at the beginning of the session about the process may be a timely nudge. If it continues to be an issue, a one-to-one conversation about the need to listen may be necessary.

It may seem clear before a group begins that someone is not going to fit in the group very well.

The organizers may wish to emphasize more strongly what is needed to be part of such a group when faced with this situation. An awareness of what is drawing persons to the group may help people find another way to meet those needs.

It must also be acknowledged that God’s presence in any individual makes it impossible for us to prejudge whether the individual will contribute and deepen a group’s experience or whether he or she will (apparently) sabotage it. The challenging experience of having a really difficult member may possibly strengthen a group.

Sometimes a group that is struggling can be helped best with an outside facilitator. Having a skilled leader steer the process, asking for silence and prayer at times, making sure each person gets a chance to share and no one dominates, can steady a group and free them to focus on knowing each other.

3. *Poor attendance.* Another problem is a group that experiences dwindling or irregular attendance. This kind of problem is most likely to occur when groups are ongoing without a clear closure date. It is helpful to face the problem of continuance squarely. Members need to ask themselves whether the group has lived out its natural lifespan. Perhaps that will be an opportunity for some folks to acknowledge they cannot continue and provide an opportunity for others to join.

4. *Group exclusivity.* A complementary problem is the group that continues to grow closer and more united and is seen by those outside it as a clique. Perhaps they do social things together, or seldom spend time with those outside their group. Clearly they enjoy a rich and rewarding friendship. It is well for such groups to be sensitive to Meeting members not part of their wonderful experience and to evaluate the possibility of un-Friendliness in their group. They need to ask themselves how to be special friends for each other and still be good friends to the whole community. However, a wonderful result of having a close-knit group in a meeting can be that it overtly encourages other groups to form, perhaps taking a role in helping them organize.

5. *Special relationships between members.* When two

members of a group have a special relationship, either a special attraction or a special dislike between them, it can create problems. Both attraction and dislike are normal human responses we have to each other. If such feelings interfere with the group itself or with the individuals' lives outside the group, it becomes a problem. Having a person from outside the group help the individuals or the group sort out the problem and work toward a resolution is most valuable. Or perhaps there will be a wise Friend in the Meeting who may help the group or the individuals work out their difficulty.

Suggested Format of Group Sessions

The outline below is designed for a group of four to six members who will be meeting for two or two-and-a-half hours. There may be an outside facilitator, or the facilitator may be a member of the group and take his or her turn.

Opening meditation (5–10 minutes). The facilitator calls the group to silence and centering. Perhaps there can be a recognized sign that the group is leaving one way of interacting and opening themselves to another way of being together. The lighting of a candle or the chime of a soft bell may call the group to a time of silent prayer. Or the facilitator may simply say a few words about “becoming fully aware of being here and now and in this loving group as we reach toward each other and open to God.”

Groups may find that, as members get to know each other better, the tendency to continue the initial time of purely social talking can stretch out. This eager conversation is a wonderful sign of the friendship that has developed, but it is not the purpose for which the group has gathered. It is the task of the facilitator to draw it to a close and move the group into a deeper sharing.

Perhaps the facilitator may wish to provide a focus for the silent meditation. A short piece of taped music, a sentence or paragraph from a devotional reading can be an aid to the group's coming together and *knowing* they are a group reaching to each other and to God.

I believe a time of silence together is essential since the participants need to prepare themselves to deeply listen. Listening to each other with our hearts is different from the listening of daily conversations. This difference in our attentiveness to each other needs to be acknowledged and prepared for with prayer.

Presenting theme (5 – 10 minutes). The facilitator may select a theme for sharing by each group member when it is his or her turn. After presenting the theme to the group, the facilitator allows time for the group to think about the theme and especially to write out reflections and experience in that area. For most people, writing allows one to explore a theme in a way that simply doesn't happen if they just think about it. Writing focuses the mind and keeps it from wandering away.

The general theme “What is going on in my life, what feelings do I have about it and how is God involved?” is important to include regularly. It allows people to share important aspects of their lives that may never be touched through narrower themes. Of course, someone in the group who has an overwhelming need to share something can certainly do that when it is his or her turn, no matter what the theme happens to be.

Having a time to reflect on the theme before the talking begins frees everyone to really listen to the person who is presenting his or her own experience and reflections. This is holy conversation. Listening deeply is the key to the conversation becoming an opening to God within each person.

Focus time on each person (20 – 25 minutes). If the group has six persons, each person has only 20 minutes; if the group has four persons, each can have up to 30 minutes. This timing sounds rigid, but, as with all Spirit-led experiences, a gentle flexibility will grow, and the varying needs of each individual will be met. However, the facilitator certainly needs to carry a watch! The facilitator takes on the timekeeper duties to free others to relax into the experience of deeply listening and responding. And next month it may be someone else's turn to facilitate.

Generally the focus person shares for about the first half of his or her time, and the group's responses and further sharing rising from those responses fill the second half. Some presenters are talkative and need a reminder by the facilitator to bring their sharing to a close so that the group can respond to them. Others are very quiet and brief, sketching the barest outline of how they relate to the theme. For them, it is good to allow plenty of silent spaces before the responders chime in with questions or comments. Often, the quiet presenters will find that the theme unfolds for them as they are talking, and even more as they are hesitating between words.

When a facilitator sees that one person's turn is drawing to a close, it can be a wonderful closing to call for a moment of silence for the group "to hold (name) in our hearts and in our prayers," "to hold (name) up into the Light of God," or to surround the person with prayer and love in many different words. The words matter little; the doing of it matters a great deal for all of the participants.

Closing (10 minutes). When everyone has had his or her time as the focus person, the facilitator may choose to ask the group to look at the evaluation questions and take a few minutes to consider them. Or the group may conclude by returning for a few minutes to the silence that has been the thread weaving through and connecting all their speaking and listening. Groups will often develop a small ritual at the close of their gathering. Some join hands or have a group hug to close their time together.

The group, individually and as a whole, are different, both emotionally and spiritually, from when they began two and a half hours ago. They are closer, more open and vulnerable, more aware of God among them. They are probably feeling more tenderly toward themselves and the others than when they gathered. It is well to acknowledge and honor that change.

Evaluating the Group Process

It is important to feel free to talk about how the group is doing, about what is happening. Some suggest this

happens at the end of each gathering. It should happen often enough so that group members feel comfortable examining their group. Here are some questions which might help:

1. What is the quality of our listening and responding to one another?
2. Do we honor each other's time by keeping the focus on the one whose turn it is?
3. How much are we aware of the presence and involvement of the Spirit (God, the Light Within) in our gatherings?
4. How does the pattern we follow suit us? What works and doesn't work? Do we need to adjust it?

Suggestions for Themes

These suggestions are only for the purpose of starting ideas rolling. Each facilitator needs to think about the group members and what would fit for them.

First and Most Important Suggestion

Members of the group share about what is going on in their own lives: what is happening, what their feelings are, how God seems involved or not involved, and so on. This is really important and should be the theme for the meeting frequently.

Other Suggestions

1. Images of God, perhaps how they changed from childhood to adult (old man with beard, creative energy, friend, spirit, etc.).
2. Rituals that have been or are meaningful (social, religious, personal).
3. The natural world and what it means to you.
4. The place or landscape that is most "home" to you and what makes it so. What does it say about you?
5. A person who profoundly influenced you and the shape of your life.
6. What is playful or creative in your life.
7. Relating to authority (also authority figures and experience with them or how we use authority when we hold it).

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8. Making choices: what five things would you take with you if you had to leave home and never return (or another variety of that question)?
 9. Bring a storytelling object to a group meeting and tell its story.
 10. A gift – talent, personality quality, developed skill – you have and have used (and perhaps one you think you have but have not used!).
 11. An experience of being very happy and what made it so (or an experience of being angry and what made it so).
 12. The people who were most truly family to you when you were a child.
 13. “Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. There is the parental self, the religious self, the professional self, the social self. . . . And each of our selves is in turn a rank individualist, not cooperative but shouting out his vote loudly when the voting time comes” (Thomas Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*). Describe two of your committee selves.
 14. Something you did in the last year that makes you feel good or fulfilled when you think about it.
 15. How your life would be different if you were spiritually free.
 16. Where you have recently seen, felt, caught the footprints of God, traces of the Holy.
 17. A situation, issue, or person about which you’ve changed your mind.
 18. What gets in the way of intimacy for you – intimacy with God or with other people?
 19. Forgiveness – needing it, receiving it, giving it.
 20. An occasion or season of great blessing in your life.
 21. How the story of Jesus has influenced your life.
 22. Something painful you’ve recovered from and the story of how you recovered.

Handout follows on next page.

Sample Handout for the First Meeting of a Spiritual Companions Group

BEGINNING THE ADVENTURE – With a Spiritual Companions Group you are setting forth on a journey whose path is uncertain and whose end is not yet in sight, and you have fellow travelers whose support has not yet been proved. I congratulate you on your courage!

On the other hand, those who responded to the invitation to set off on this journey responded to a specific invitation designed to attract persons interested in a specific kind of experience. Therefore I think I am safe in making several assumptions about this group, assumptions that create a bond between you and a strong start for your journey.

Assumptions

1. Everyone is committed to being present at all the group meetings, which may be rearranged to ensure that all can participate.
2. Everyone is committed to sharing from their own lives and experience, recognizing that deeper sharing will come as trust grows.
3. In order to deserve the growing trust of our spiritual companions here, each will hold in strict confidence what is said here.
4. Everyone has a desire to respect and care about the others more deeply.
5. Everyone has a desire to grow into a deeper relationship with God, to be more open to the Spirit moving in their lives.

Question for Reflection and Sharing

What do you hope will happen in the group? What need do you bring to the group?

The Essential Elements of Spiritual Companions Groups

1. We begin with **SILENCE**, thus giving ourselves time to center down, slow down, and recognize that we are moving from one way of interacting (socially greeting one another) to another. Silence should also come while one person is presenting, as we pause to consider what the person is saying. We return to silently being together before the next person shares. In silence, we tune our inner ears to hear “where the words are coming from.”

Silence is the home of the word . . . [and] gives strength and fruitfulness to the word. (Henri Nouwen)

Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God. (W. Paul Jones)

2. Out of the silence, **SOMEONE SPEAKS**. We speak out of our own experience and life. We speak of what we know best, that which we have learned experientially.

A word with power is a word which comes out of the silence. A word that bears fruit is a word that emerges from the silence and returns to it. (Henri Nouwen)

3. As someone speaks, **WE LISTEN**. We listen with our whole beings, wanting to understand with our heads and our hearts. Often when people listen to each other, we are mentally comparing what they are saying with some experience of our own, and even preparing to tell our own story. Here we try to listen completely focused on the speaker, trying not to make judgments but to receive the person behind the words lovingly.

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)

If someone truly listens to me, my spirit begins to expand. If someone pays attention to the part of me that struggles to know God, my search intensifies. (Rose O'Reilley)

4. A time for **RESPONDING** follows one person's sharing. The responding may be silence and holding the person in the Light. It may be quiet reflection on the person's story. It may be affirmation or an expression of caring. It may be a question which shows our caring. (How are you getting enough rest in the middle of working full-time and going to school?) It is not problem-solving, even if the speaker has presented a problem. (This is the easiest trap to fall into!) Our responding keeps the focus on the speaker; it is their time, not ours to tell of a similar thing that once happened to us.

Introductory Sharing

You are setting out on a spiritual adventure together with these people. Pretend they really don't know you and you don't know them. What would you like them to know about you at the beginning?

Where are you from or what work do you do? Your religious history or family status? Any personality quirks or likes or dislikes which you want to lay out? Any powerful beliefs you hold to? What about joys and griefs?

Take a few minutes to think about and perhaps write down what you would like to share with your companions at this time.