



Spiritual Small Group Guide

For leaders and members
of Small Group Ministries

Created by The Rev. N. Graham Standish, Ph.D., M.S.W.

Introduction

Welcome to spiritual small group ministry. You will find that this small group program can help you create an experience that challenges the members to grow spiritually, while building relationships and friendships. This guide will help you to understand both why the small group ministry you are involved in is important, and help you to create a strong and enduring group experience.

The following guide is divided into several sections. First there's an explanation of what small groups are designed to do, and why they help people to grow spiritually. Following that is an overview of a program rooted in the discipline of spiritual reading that has been developed by Dr. Standish, and how it works to help people grow spiritually. Next is an outline of the program, which will allow your group to continue growing for years to come. Finally, is a specific guide on how to lead a group so that it remains healthy and vibrant.



1. What Is the Purpose of a Small Group?

Small group ministries have become very popular in churches across the country over the past twenty years. They have become especially popular in the large, evangelical megachurch movement that has been a growing force in Christianity. Many of these large churches actually began first as small groups, and then grew out of that. What these churches understood, something that has taken more mainstream denominational churches (such as the Presbyterian Church) years to accept, is that many in today's population feel adrift and alone and are seeking answers to life's questions as well as healthier relationships. While worship services provide an opportunity to grow spiritually, they don't necessarily allow people to engage in discussions and form relationships that are also part of the Christian experience. Small groups take what is begun in worship, and then offer people weekly opportunities to grow their faith.

This focus on small groups isn't new. Jesus created a small group around him with his disciples. The early monastic movement was a movement of bringing a small number of adherents together to create a community that acted like a small group. And John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, built a "method" of Christian growth built upon small groups.

Small groups ultimately are part of a church's adult education program, but they offer a more intensive program of growth than is found in the typical Sunday adult education class. While Sunday morning classes and courses help people to understand the life of faith and the life of the church better, they are designed mostly to help people grow intellectually. Small groups do much more. They help people grow in mind, heart, and soul by engaging people at deeper levels. Then, through discussions, they help people to change their lives as they listen to the Holy Spirit's voice and guidance in each other.



Today, small groups range from those that meet to do simple Bible-studies, to groups that meet to discuss the most complicated theological concepts. This program is designed to move back-and-forth between a study and discussion of the Bible, to a more in-depth exploration of the teachings of great Christian mystics and modern spiritual writers.

2. A Program of Adult Spiritual Formation

Onlookers, Seekers, Followers, and Disciples

The goal of this program is to help adults grow "spiritually" by helping them "form" a life that is always growing in maturity. In short, we want to help people form a mature life in which they are healthy psychologically, relationally, and spiritually. There are certain guiding principles behind this program.

We recognize that there are basically four kinds of people who are attracted to the life of a church. They are *onlookers*, *seekers*, *followers*, and *disciples*. Typically onlookers and seekers avoid being part of small groups, while followers and disciples are more comfortable in them. What we try to do is to create groups that attract seekers, followers, and disciples, and help them to grow so that seekers become followers, followers become disciples, and eventually disciples become apostles (yes, that does make another category of Christian, but we'll get to that later).

So what do the different categories mean? They are based on an understanding of the people who came to Jesus to hear his teachings:

- An **onlooker** is basically a person who is attracted to a church, but is reluctant to commit. Onlookers attend church occasionally, but they avoid making a commitment to being part of the church. They may like the church, the members, the worship services, the preaching, and the music, but they never really see a connection between a commitment to the church's life and the spiritual quality of their own lives. While they are likely to say that they are Christian, they don't really believe that regular church attendance is a factor in learning to become a good, loving, and spiritual person. Faith for them is an idea, but not a life. Jesus was constantly surrounded by these kinds of onlookers. They would have been the people who showed up to hear Jesus preach, and who appreciated what he said, and then went home, saying, "I like what he said about love. I'm not sure I agree with everything he said, but I liked it. I'll have to hear him again next time he passes by." They heard Jesus, but what they heard didn't necessarily change them.
- A **seeker** is a person who recognizes the need for something more in life. Seekers, either because of turmoil in their lives or because of changes they are going through, are "seeking" something spiritual to make their lives bet-



ter. They recognize that something is missing in their lives, so they seek answers. The trouble is that they don't know where to find answers. Like people suffering in the desert, they can confuse mirages for true spiritual water. They are most likely to either become enamored of New Age ideas, or fall for black-and-white, simplistic, legalistic Christian ideas. They are seeking answers to their problems, and are easy prey for anything that makes sense, even if it is false. Jesus was surrounded by people like this, people who either flirted with the surrounding religions of the time, or were attracted to the rigid Jewish system of the time. They were people like the rich lawyer who walked away disappointed because Jesus told him to sell all and follow him, and the woman married seven times who had hoped Jesus would condone her life. When seekers are surrounded by healthy Christians who introduce them to a healthy Christian faith and practice, they eventually become followers who take spiritual growth, prayer, and service more seriously.

- A **follower** is a Christian who makes a commitment to put Christ and Christian faith at the center of her or his life. Followers are generally committed to serving God in the church. They attend worship regularly, pray on a regular basis, try to love others as best they can, want to learn more and grow in their faith. They believe that they can be God's hands and feet in the world. In Jesus' time, these were the folks whom Jesus sent out to teach and heal. They were not as committed as the disciples. They had regular jobs and families, but they still committed a lot of time to serving Jesus in his ministry. Many of the most committed church leaders and workers would be considered followers. Over time, followers can become disciples if they are given the opportunity to grow.
- A **disciple** is a Christian who has committed her or his life to learning about God and the Christian life, and to taking that extra step that says, "I will put Christ first in everything." In the beginning there were only 12 disciples around Jesus, but the circle grew after Jesus ascended to heaven. These were the people who were willing to change everything about their lives in order to serve Christ. Ultimately, all of us are called to be disciples, but not all of us say "yes" to that call. The small group program is geared to lead people to this kind of commitment in the end, although it certainly is not a requirement. We simply extend the invitation to say "yes" to Christ in everything. To be a disciple literally means to be a "student," to be someone who is willing to put Christ at the center, and like a student, allow God's Spirit to shape and form our lives however God wants.

As mentioned above, the ultimate goal for any Christian is to become something like an apostle. The apostles were what the disciples became. To be an apostle literally means to be a "sent one"—a person sent out by God to change lives and the world. To be an apostle means to be a spiritually deep person of commitment, devotion, love, and service. Not all can become apostles, for not all will be willing to make that commitment. No program can teach a person to become an apostle. Only God can call apostles. Our hope, though, is that over time people involved in our small group program will sense that apostolic calling to be God's "sent one."

How does this spiritual small group program help us to grow spiritually?

This small group program is a program designed to lead people to grow from whomever they are, and from whatever level of faith they have, to a deeper level of maturity. It does so by starting at a basic level, and over time pushing the group members to dig deeper into the mystery of faith. Typically the group starts by understanding the basic teachings of Jesus as found in the gospels. Then it introduces members to Christian writers who teach basic principles of prayer, service, love, faith, community, and Christian practice. Next, it goes deeper into these topics by exploring what the mystics of Christian faith have taught. Then it digs deeper into the Bible by exploring Paul's teach-

ings, as well as other New Testament writers. Eventually it introduces members to topics such as suffering, miracles, the faith journey, growing in spiritual maturity, and understanding the nature of God. As the group grows in maturity, it explores themes such as creation, justice, compassion, and the nature of following Christ in everything.



The main point you'll notice is that the program always pushes people gently but consistently to grow spiritually, to grow into Christian maturity, with the belief that it is the journey toward wisdom that leads to a blessed life. The wiser we become in everything, the more we are able to deal with life's ups and downs, serve God in all situation, and begin to lead others to grow spiritually, whether it be our children, spouses, or friends.

3. Outline of the Program

Reading and Discussion:

Small groups typically use books or other reading materials as the basis of their discussion. Growth through a small group takes place as people engage in three disciplines that open them to the voice of the Holy Spirit:

1. *Reading the materials*—the reading materials are selected to explore topics that lead members to grow spiritually. When they read the materials spiritually and prayerfully, they begin to hear the first voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to them and helping them to grow. To help your members learn how to read spiritually and prayerfully, you'll find a "Guild to Spiritual Reading" in the fourth section of this training manual. Or you can go to the "Resources" tab of Dr. Standish's website, www.ngrahamstandish.org, and download a free copy designed to be printed and shared with members of small groups.
2. *Praying over the materials*—It's not enough just to read the materials, but we need to pray over what we've read and reflect on it. The readings not only speak to us through the voice of the writer of our materials, but through our thoughts and reflections.
3. *Discussing the materials*—Finally, the Holy Spirit speaks to us as we grapple with, question, and clarify the ideas through our group discussions.

Small Group Discussion

The discussions for the group each week are based on the week's readings. In the introduction to the group, the leader should stress that members read the material over the course of the week, and not just immediately prior to group meeting. A guide to reading the material spiritually and discussing it in the group can be found in the appendix as "A Guide to Spiritual Reading."

Suggested Reading Program

The following bibliography of books is a suggested reading course for the life of the group. The books are chosen so that each one builds upon the other. What they represent are modern writers who have an enduring voice that cuts through modern biases, 20th century writers whose works rise above cultural biases, and more ancient mystical writers whose works have endured throughout the centuries and are regarded as classical works. These books have been chosen in a way that moves the groups in different directions with each book, by touching on different topics of Christian Faith. Some writers are more theological in style, others are more practical and exper-

riential. Some write from a more relational perspective, others from a more ideological perspective. Some write about how to do something, others write in a way that helps us gain a better general understanding.

By following this particular course, over time the group will develop a much broader Christian perspective. Too many churches and small group programs only offer the same kinds of books or Bible studies over and over. This reading course will expose members to ancient, traditional, and contemporary writers of all denominations, both male and female, who help us understand our faith from a broad and deep point of view.

How do you go through the books? Take it one book at a time and one chapter at a time. The idea is not to have a group that reads every book. Instead, the idea is that as the group progresses through the program, the next book will lead the group in a different direction. If the group is willing to stay together, there is always another resource and another direction for the group to go.

The following are suggestions for spiritual reading. The focus is not to give you books that present one particular spiritual perspective, but to offer a variety of books from great spiritual writers from ancient, traditional, modern times, and contemporary eras. Also, they range in perspectives from Protestant to Catholic to Orthodox, as well as progressive, conservative, moderate, charismatic, and evangelical. The point is to offer resources that extend beyond our normal theological and spiritual comfort zones so that we can be exposed to the great depth and breadth of the Christian spiritual tradition.

The leader should introduce the book to the group prior to the completion of the book the group is presently reading (except in the case of the first book, which should be introduced in the first session). Each book then should be divided up into a reading schedule that goes chapter by chapter (when the chapters are normal sized), or a collection of chapters at a time (when the chapters are short, two-to-three page chapters). In the case of using *The Daily Study Bible*, divide the readings into manageable segments. The optimum number of pages to read each week is between 10 and 20 pages. Sample reading schedules can be found in the appendix. The following is the list of resources:

1. N. Graham Standish, *Paradoxes for Living*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
2. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Harper & Row, 1988
3. Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.
4. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995
5. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Ave Maria Press, 1990
6. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, Doubleday, 1999
7. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992
8. George G. Ritchie, *Return from Tomorrow*, Spire Books, 1978
9. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Touchstone Books, 1996
10. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, Crossroads, 2002.
11. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, Paulist Press, 1984

12. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Paraclete Press, 1985
13. Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Light*, Ballantine Books, 1983
14. Hannah Hurnard, *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, Living Books, 1986
15. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Publications, 1977.
16. Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, Baker Book House, 1952 (or any other version)
17. Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009.
18. Alexander (Author), Vera Bouteneff (Translator), *Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998
19. Richard Foster, *Payer*, HarperCollins, 1992.
20. N. Graham Standish, *Discovering the Narrow Path*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002
21. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1982
22. Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, Jossey-Bass, 2012.
23. Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Zondervan, 2000.
24. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, HarperCollins, 1998.
25. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986
26. Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*
27. Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*

3. Guide on Leading a Group So that It Remains Healthy and Vibrant

A. Setting Up Your Small Group

When members join the group, the rules of the group should be distributed and read to the members. The guidelines can be found in the appendix under "Group Guidelines." You can fill in the name of the group prior to distributing them to members. In addition, members should be encouraged to sign a group covenant. A copy of a covenant can be found in the appendix under the title, "Group Covenant."

B. Setting a Foundation

As you prepare to introduce the small group to others, it is important that you set the proper foundation. That foundation is prayer. Ultimately, begin by praying to God that God will send to you the right people for the group, and trust that this is what God will do. As you continue to introduce the group to others, continue praying and trusting in God's Spirit. The goal is always to let this be a work of the Holy Spirit in Christ's body. As the group leader, your ultimate responsibility is to facilitate the work of the Spirit.

C. Size

The ideal group size is between 8 and 12 members, since there is always attrition in small groups. The group often will shrink over time, but it really shouldn't go below 6 members, if possible. If a group grows over 16 members, you should divide the group to create two new groups of 8, although there will be resistance to this. Also, the group should always be open to new members. Closed groups tend to atrophy over time.

D. Publicity

How do you initially invite people to become members of the group? The first thing to do is to offer an open invitation in the church bulletin and newsletter for people to join your group. In your invitation, stress that the first sessions is merely an introduction to the group, and that there is no obligation unless they choose to make one. Typically you would have members sign a covenant after the second meeting, with the understanding that they would remain committed until after the first book is finished.

Although a public invitation is important, the reality is that most groups grow best through personal invitations to people within the church whom you sense may be hungry for spiritual deepening. This can be friends whom you already know, as well as those you think may be interested. Check with the pastor and /or staff members for others who they may know are interested in joining a small group. In addition, membership is not limited to church members. All are invited and friends are certainly welcome.

E. Setting a Time and Place

The first group meeting should be a general introduction to the group, with time especially spent giving members a sample of what will take place. For instance, during the first session you might want to have a copy of two or three pages from the book you will use, if possible, for people to read and discuss. At that meeting you can hand out copies of the book (if they haven't already ordered ones on their own) with a schedule for all people who want to continue with the group and attend the next meeting, which will be one in which covenants are signed.

Where should you meet? It all depends on what kind of people you expect to attract. Meetings can be held in coffee shops, homes, or the church. Gain a sense of who you are inviting, and what kind of context is best for them for discussion. Also, choose a time that is conducive to who you are trying to attract.

What is the best length of time for a group? Typically a group should meet for about one-and-a-half hours. Over that time and it begins to wear people down and cause them to feel trapped. Under that time and there usually isn't enough time to greet, socialize a bit, and then discuss.

How to Lead Each Small Group Meeting

The following is a suggested general outline for each meeting:

- Place an unlit candle in the middle of the room, if possible. Invite the members of the group to take time in silence to let go of their schedules, anxieties, and concerns so that they can receive God's light. Have a member of the group light the candle, and then sit in silence for 30 seconds to a minute. The leader can then invite members to read together a group prayer, if one has been designed for the group.

- Spend five minutes having people check in and ask for any requests for prayer.
- Move into the discussion.

The following is a guide to help you lead the discussion.

Focus:

- When leading the discussion, the focus of the group is to get the participants eventually to speak both in depth and in practical and personal terms. We are not trying to get them to tell us their dark and dirty secrets, but to help them reflect more deeply on what God is saying to them about their lives.
- Most people, when talking about spiritual matters, will typically try to talk theologically and abstractly, or avoid talking about things theologically and spiritually. Our point here is to get them to talk more personally about what they are hearing God saying to them in the passage, and then to discern how to apply what they've heard in their lives. Thus, the leader has to move the participants away from surfacey, abstract talk (i.e. "I think we are being told that we must be born-again.") to more in-depth, personal, spiritual perspectives (i.e. "What I hear God saying to me is that I need to be willing to let God change me from the inside, and to do that I need to be more open to listening to God, especially when I don't want to hear God.").

How do you do this?

You move people into depth by a combination of asking ever deeper questions, while being careful not to drive people too deep too soon. The idea is that by the end of the meeting, people should be talking more deeply. As the group grows over time, the members will learn to do this themselves.

What kind of questions should I ask? (You can also ask any question at any time)

In the beginning of the meeting:

- What did you hear God saying to you in our passage this past week?
- What words or sentences really struck you?
- Did anyone struggle with any parts of the passages?
- (If no one responds or it seems like people are floundering) Let me tell you what hit me this past week....

In the middle of the meeting, as people talk about things more in-depth:

- What does this say about what God is doing in your life?
- What does this say about your relationship with God?
- What does this say about what God is calling us to do in our lives?
- (If no one responds or it seems like people are floundering) Let me tell you what I hear God saying to me in this passage...

Towards the last third of the meeting:

- So, what does all of this mean in more practical terms?
- How do we take this and apply it in a realistic way in our lives?
- How do we implement this in our lives?
- (If no one responds or it seems like people are floundering) Let me tell you what I think this means in practical terms...

These questions are a guide. As the group becomes more comfortable with each other, the leader really won't have to ask questions much at all.

Close in a "Circle Prayer."

Clasp hands and form a circle. Have the leader begin by saying a prayer. When finished, she or he squeezes the hand of the next person. If that person wants to say a prayer, she or he does so. If not, she or he squeezes the hand of the next person. Continue this until it comes back to the leader. The leader can close by inviting all to share in saying the Lord's Prayer together. During this time, encourage people to offer prayers over concerns mentioned in the sharing time.

Dealing with Troublesome Issues

The following are some suggestions for dealing with issues that typically arise in a small group:

A. Life-span of a the group

Every group has a life-span. Some groups have a longer life-span, others a short one. Typically, the longer the life-span, the healthier the group. Or more accurately, healthy groups tend to have a longer life-span. Ensuring a long life for a group normally entails making sure that:

- *resource materials are chosen that will gently push people to grow spiritually without being too complicated*
- *the group always welcomes new members, as long as they agree to the conditions of the group,*
- *the leaders continually check with the members to see if the group is still helping them to grow.*

There are also certain factors that tend to cause groups to die sooner . They include:

- *Becoming too much of a social group, and not pushing people to grow spiritually.* Why is this a problem? Because people typically have social groups already. Even if they like socializing within this group, over time they will decide that they don't need another social group. What distinguishes small groups is that they offer something no other group does, which is an opportunity to grow.
- *Becoming too insular.* Sometimes groups are resistant to bring in new members. Having a group that doesn't welcome new members isn't necessarily a death-knell for a group, but it inhibits the health of the group by barring new voices and causing the group to potentially form into a clique. A group can become closed and remain healthy, but only with good leadership that guards against the group becoming a clique or a social group.

B. One Member Dominates the Group in a Negative Way

It is not uncommon for a few people in a group to have stronger voices than others, and for them to be the ones typically to introduce the issues and ideas to be discussed. To have a few stronger personalities be stronger in a group is typically a normal and healthy thing, as long as those stronger personalities keep the group growing and offer the opportunity for others to talk. It becomes a problem when one person becomes a negative force, either by offering a persistent cynical and complaining voice, or by causing the group to focus on her or his problems (in essence, treating the group like a therapy or problem-solving group in which problems never really get solved). What do you do when a person dominates in a negative way? It can be very tricky, but usually there are two effective strategies. The first is more subtle. The leader needs to be aware of when the person is about to “go off,” and then work to gently bringing the group back to the topic at hand. One way of doing this is simply saying to the domineering person, “What you are saying is really important, but I don’t want to lose sight of our discussion. What we were talking about was (summarize the topic). Does anyone else have anything to say on what we were talking about?” Another way is to gently talk to the person privately about the need to let others speak. The latter is more difficult. If you are considering it, it is suggested that you contact either Graham Standish or Connie Frierson to discuss how to do this.

C. Conflict between Members Threatens to Disrupt the Group

It is rare that this happens, but when it does it can cause problems. The best way to deal with it is simply to talk to the person privately and tell her or him your concerns that her or his conflict will disrupt the group. Invite her or him to deal with their issues privately. The person may become angry and decide to leave the group. In many cases, that may be best for the group, but don’t push the person out because that can cause conflict in the group as people feel the need to choose sides.

D. Attrition

Most groups shrink over time as members deal with real-life factors such as family or work needs, commitments to other organizations or groups, and a need to slow life down. This is normal. When a person drops out of a group, or suggests that she or he needs to, it is helpful if the leader has a private conversation with the person to make sure that the problem is not with the group itself, such as resources not being helpful, conflict within the group, or struggling with her or his faith. Talking with the person is not crucial, but it can be helpful. The reality is that sometimes people leave groups criticizing the group, but the problem may really lie with the person leaving the group. The best way to maintain a group over time is to invite new members to join. Each time the group starts a new resource becomes a good time for the group to consider inviting at least one new member to join the group.

E. Disagreements over Beliefs

At some point in every group’s life there comes a time when people who have strong theological beliefs clash. This can be a positive situation in the end, but it does require strong, yet gentle group leadership. When leaders join in the argument, picking one side or the other, it usually backfires. A better way of handling the disagreement is to see it as an opportunity for spiritual growth. If the leader can summarize both positions and then ask if there is a way both can be true, or both reveal the Spirit’s guidance, then it can lead to growth. Consider saying something along the lines of, “What I hear you saying is [summarize the first person’s beliefs] And what I hear you

[the other person] saying is [summarize that person's beliefs]. Is there a way that the Spirit may be leading us to another insight instead of having it be one or the other?"

F. Disagreement with the Author of a Resource

It is also not uncommon for people to disagree with the beliefs of the author of the resource you are using. This is a healthy thing, for it is rare to find something written on theology or spirituality that has all the right answers, no matter how much the author, or those who like the author, may believe that she or he has all the right answers. The problem with disagreements come when the discussions are always about what we disagree with. It is okay for people to say that they disagree with something, but the leader should always refocus the discussion on what the author says that is helpful. For example, a leader might say, "Yeah, it is hard to agree with this. But what is it that you do agree with and find helpful?"

APPENDIX: A GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL READING

Whether you sense it or not, God is continually calling you to deepen your faith. God's Spirit constantly nudges you to open your heart to God's wisdom, love, and grace. In addition, God is constantly talking to you and telling you how you can live a deeper and better life. Unfortunately, life is so noisy that it is hard to distinguish God's voice from everything else. The practice of prayerfully reading the Bible will help you discern God's voice more fully in your life.

Reading Prayerfully

You are asked to engage in the discipline of prayerful reading. Reading the Bible prayerfully means making scripture part of your prayer life. Instead of sitting down and reading quickly so that you can get what it says fast, prayerful reading means reading slowly, reflectively, and prayerfully. You read in a way that helps you discover God's voice to you in the passages. It requires that you take your time and listen..

Too many people try to read the Bible intellectually and scientifically in order to "figure out" what it is saying. They spend so much time trying to understand it intellectually that they never really hear what God is saying to them. For example, when reading the creation story, too many people focus on whether or not it is literally true. Prayerful reading asks us to put those concerns aside for the moment in order to ask "What is God saying to me in these stories? What is God say-ing about why the universe was created? What is our relationship with God meant to be like? How are we to live in relationship with all creation?" These are prayerful questions that God wants to answer. When we read prayerfully, God slowly answers these answers. Please practice the following and turn your reading into a prayer discipline:

- *Set aside a certain time, in a quiet place free of distractions, for prayer and reading (usually 20 to 30 minutes), but longer if you can.*
- *Begin by centering yourself in a minute of silence.*
- *Ask God to guide you.*
- *Read slowly, ready to grapple with the reading.*
- *Take time to pause, reflect, and pray about what you have read. Try to insert yourself into the passage rather than figuring it out.*
- *If you disagree or don't understand something, ask God to help you.*
- *Offer your concerns to God in prayer, Close in silence, and thank God for guiding you.*

A Discipline of Spiritual Reading

The following are other helpful tips to help you grow spiritually through your readings.

1. **Read Humbly:** Be open to what God has to say by putting aside your ego, biases, and expectations. Try to listen for what God is telling you instead of focusing on whether you agree or disagree with the passage. Remember that at first we often resist the truths that God wants to reveal to us.
2. **Read and Reread:** Prayerful reading often involves rereading, dwelling, reflecting, and praying so that we can discover deeper messages. Be willing to keep going over the same material.

3. **Stress Quality Instead of Quantity:** Don't read material just to "get it done," but instead try to dwell on it so as to discover what it says for your life. Place yourself in the scripture by asking:
 - What is the basic message of God in this passage?
 - How does the message of this passage effect my life?
 - How do I implement what I am hearing into my life?
4. **Read Spiritually, Not Intellectually or Emotionally:** When we read intellectually, we can become overly critical or analytical. When we read emotionally, we often accept only those ideas that "feel right." Be open both intellectually and emotionally so that God can speak to your heart.
5. **Be Patient and Trusting:** Stay with the passage even if you don't get any great ideas or insights, and even if you don't understand it. Trust that God is speaking through the words you are reading. Sometimes God speaks in very subtle ways. Patience gives subtle messages space to grow.
6. **Wait upon God to Disclose God's Mysteries:** God always works and speaks in mysterious ways because God inhabits the realm of the eternal. God is more patient and gentle than we are.
7. **Remember that the Bible is a guide to be read over and over again.** Nobody ever "knows" the Bible completely, even if they pretend they do. It is normal to be confused by much of what you read. It is written in a different way from modern books. Instead, read each passage knowing that in the future you will get other opportunities to explore it more. This is only a first reading.

Group Guidelines

Group Guidelines for the _____ Group

The following are guidelines for this group

- All of our discussions should be kept confidential.
- We should endeavor to treat each other with respect and care, trying our best to listen with open and non-judgmental ears and hearts, and trying our best to speak in ways that are loving, humble, and tolerant of others. We should avoid trying to “solve” each other’s problems, but instead find ways to listen and be supportive, only offering guidance when it is asked for. This means following Jesus’ guidance in the gospels:
 - *Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? And*
 - *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*
- We should do our best to have read all pertinent resources and materials ahead of time so that we are prepared to discuss them in the group.
- We should do our best to pray for others in our group.

Group Covenant

What is a Covenant?

A Covenant is an agreement between people establishing a commitment between them. When we enter into a faith covenant like this one, we are making a commitment to God to do our best to serve God by following through with our part of the covenant. We trust that if we remain faithful to our part, God will be faithful to us and bless what we are doing. In the case of this small group, we are agreeing to be committed to reading, reflecting, gathering, listening, and discussing in ways that help us grow in faith and life.

*As for me, I am establishing my covenant
with you and your descendants after you. . .
This is the sign of the covenant that I make
between me and you and every living creature that is with you,
for all future generations:
I have set my bow in the clouds,
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth
(Genesis 9: 9-13).*

The Covenant

- I agree to be part of the _____ Group.
- Recognizing that prayer is foundational to the Christian life, I agree to do my best to pray daily for the world, my church, my family, other group members, and myself.
- I agree to make this group a priority for my life, and to do my best to put aside all other commitments when they are in conflict with my commitment to this group. I also understand that I must be balanced in this, not neglecting my family, friends, or personal life for the sake of this group.
- I agree to participate in this group by attending the regular meetings and making them a priority as much as possible.
- I agree to do my best to be prepared for each group by reading the assigned materials, even if I do not plan to be at a particular group meeting.
- I agree to do my best to share my thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and feelings, as they relate to the group, and to listen to others respectfully and lovingly as they share.
- I agree to be honest with others; keep matters within the group confidential; affirm others and the church; and refrain from criticizing the church, members, or others.

Signed _____ Date _____