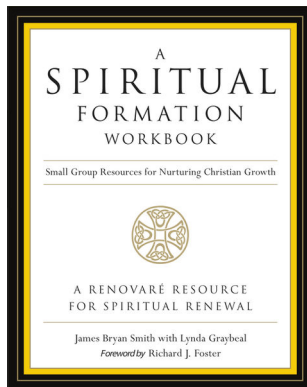




A Renovaré Resource

Starting a Group

(excerpted from *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*, pp. 15-21. HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 1999. Used with permission.)



Since you are reading this workbook, we know that you have caught the vision of a mobilized Church going out into the world and making "disciples of all nations," permanently changing that world for the better (Matt. 28:19b). While the Church has spread organically around the world, on an individual level it seems to be failing to "make disciples." About this, philosopher and writer Dallas Willard says, "Our existing churches and denominations do not have active, well-designed, intently pursued plans to accomplish [fulfilling the Great Commission] in their members.... [Y]ou will not find any widely influential element of our church leadership that has a plan—not a vague wish or dream, but a plan for implementing all phases of the Great Commission" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. 167).

We at Renovaré believe that the strategy presented here—Spiritual Formation Groups where Christians meet to learn the Six Traditions of the Church, to do the related disciplines, to hold each other accountable, and to encourage one another—makes disciples. And incorporating the Renovaré materials into an existing group or starting a Spiritual Formation Group is much easier than you might think.

The following guidelines will help you put a group together.

WORKING WITH AN EXISTING GROUP

If you are already meeting in a small group not formally affiliated with a church (or affiliated with a church but independently guided) and would like to see this material used, begin by praying about the idea. Trust God to guide you for the right time to approach the leader or (if you are the leader) the members and ask if they would like to try out a nine-session Spiritual Formation Group. If the leader or group answers no, relax and thank God that you are in a small group where you can have fellowship and companionship in your Christian walk. If the answer is yes, thank God for the opening and ask the leader if you can help get the materials together; if you are the leader, start making plans for the first session. (Alternatively, you could simply integrate individual aspects of this program into your existing structure and format.)

STARTING A NEW GROUP

Starting a new group is a little more complicated, but we hope the following guidelines will help you. Again, begin by asking the Lord for guidance. If the answer is no, continue to pray for a door to open that will bring other opportunities for spiritual growth into your life. If the answer is yes, thank God for his faithfulness in providing spiritual nurture for you and start working through the following steps.

Involve Your Church Staff

If you want to start a group in your own church, the expertise and encouragement of the pastor or priest and other leaders will be invaluable. They are responsible for the spiritual health of "the flock" and are therefore very concerned that members take part in helpful programs. We suggest that you ask them to look over this workbook and any other Renovaré materials you may have.

Doing this is not merely a common courtesy; it is essential if the plan is to have a positive effect on your church. The pastoral staff is ultimately responsible for the programming of the local church. This is in no way an obstacle; rather, it is an opportunity. If church leaders endorse the start-up of your Spiritual Formation Group—and possibly other groups—you will have taken a major step toward your goal.

If possible, arrange a time when you can sit down and discuss the program with the pastor or priest and other leaders, after they have had a chance to look over your materials. Should they voice concerns or point out potential problems, discuss them thoroughly. They may have small-group plans that do not currently include Spiritual Formation Groups. Try not to leave the meeting before reaching a consensus.

Remember, your task is to get permission to start a Spiritual Formation Group. We have yet to hear of such a request being denied. Most clergy and staff who have become acquainted with the program not only have allowed groups to start but have endorsed them (and sometimes have been involved themselves).

Having gotten permission to begin a group, you are off to a great start. Of course, if you are starting a group not affiliated with a church, you can skip this step and go directly to the next one.

Find One Other Person

The next step is to find at least one other person who wants to form a group. Perhaps you have a close friend, a person at your church who might like to be in a group of this kind. Arrange a time to explain the Spiritual Formation Group and answer any questions (see "The First Meeting" and "Basic Answers to Basic Questions," below). The general rule is this: be enthusiastic but not pushy. Your eagerness to start a group is invaluable. A positive attitude is infectious, and others will be drawn by your excitement alone. But keep in mind that the group

will not be for everyone. At this point you are looking for a person who wants to be a part of a group that will challenge him or her.

Once you have found a partner, you have actually established a group. Although many Spiritual Formation Groups involve only two people, you may wish to include others—perhaps friends drawn by your excitement or people who are merely curious. Keep in mind, however, that not everyone will feel comfortable in a Spiritual Formation Group. Do not be surprised if ultimately some participants choose not to commit to the group. If you want to invite others, go on to the next step.

Invite Others to Join You

Do you know other people who would like to be in a Spiritual Formation Group? We have learned through experience that many people would like to be in this kind of small group but have never been invited. The following approaches are effective in finding people who are interested:

- *Put an announcement in the church newsletter and/or bulletin.*
Ask the pastoral staff if you may put a notice in the next issue of the church newsletter and/or in the bulletin. Feel free to use the following wording as a guide:

Are you interested in experiencing growth in your spiritual life? If so, a Spiritual Formation Group will begin meeting on [date] at [time] in [place]. Please call [name] at the church office ([telephone number]) or [name] at [location] ([telephone number]) if you want to join us.

- Be sure to get permission from personnel in the church office before directing telephone calls to them, and tell them what information you need from callers.
- *Make an announcement during worship.*
Ask your pastor or priest if you can make a brief announcement during the worship service. People like to see and hear from the person starting a new effort. Alternatively, pastoral leaders can make the announcement, creating enthusiasm through their obvious support. The announcement can be as short as the above news item, or you can offer more details. Ask people who have questions or are interested in joining the Spiritual Formation Group to meet with you at a specific place in the church (or perhaps at a restaurant) after the service.
- *Send letters and follow up with a telephone call.*
You can send letters of explanation/invitation to members of your local church, to friends who are not members, or to both groups. Ask God to guide you to the right people. It is more important that each person hunger for the loving accountability provided by a Spiritual Formation Group than that he or she have other interests in common. After you are sure the letters have been received, follow up with a phone call to respond to any questions people may have.

If you are uncomfortable with the above suggestions or are not quite sure if you are ready to start a group larger than two people, you may want to include only yourself and your friend for now. Since this is your group, you can decide whom to meet with, where to meet, and when to begin. But like other decisions about the spiritual life, this one should be made only after careful, thoughtful prayer.

Find the Right Number

How many people should be in a Spiritual Formation Group? We recommend two to seven, though some groups with as many as eight members meet successfully.

The primary reason we recommend limiting the group to seven people is that you will need to be sensitive to how long each meeting lasts. Our experience has shown that when there are too many people in a group, either the group goes beyond the recommended time of one and one-half hours or some members do not have an opportunity to share.

In addition, the level of intimacy decreases when groups become too large. People tend not to share in groups larger than six or seven. They may feel that their participation burdens other group members or that they are using time other members could use better. A group composed of four to five people feels safer for most of us.

Once your group starts, others will hear about it, and eventually more people may wish to join. Feel free to make room for more. Should the Spiritual Formation Group initially be too big or later become too large, you and the other members may decide to divide into two or more smaller groups. If your group is affiliated with a church, your pastoral leaders may want to be involved in the decision to form an additional group.

THE FIRST MEETING: ANSWERING START-UP QUESTIONS

Once you have advertised the meeting and have enough interested people, you will need to make calls to remind everyone of the time and place. With all of the organization done, you will then be ready for the first meeting.

At that meeting, you will need to give a brief description of what the group will be like and what will be asked of its members (if you have not already done so while talking with people about coming to the first meeting). Other than you and your partner (who, we assume, has a fairly clear idea of what the Spiritual Formation Group will be doing), the other members will probably have some questions. Questions commonly asked include the following:

QUESTION: What is a Spiritual Formation Group?

ANSWER: Most of us want to know in very simple terms what a group we will be meeting with several times is going to be like, what it will try to accomplish, and how it will go about reaching its goal. You will be able to answer these questions by reading over the materials and by becoming familiar with the RENOVARE Spiritual Formation

Group plan presented in this workbook. This should prepare you to give a succinct explanation of the aim and purpose of your group.

QUESTION: What kind of commitment IS expected of me?

ANSWER: An eight-session "test-drive" plus one regular meeting. Share with the others that this is only a trial period during which they will explore a new approach to spiritual formation. The only commitment they are being asked to make is to meet nine times, preferably weekly, for an hour to an hour and a half. The workbook will refer to meetings as weekly, but the schedule should be something that is agreeable to all participants.

At the end of the ninth meeting (or, if the group prefers, at a special tenth meeting), the group will evaluate their experience and decide whether or not to continue gathering. This timeframe will help people who are not ready to make a lengthy commitment at the outset. Most of us like to test the water before diving in. After nine meetings the benefits—as well as the work involved—will be apparent. A responsible decision to commit to the group can then be made by each individual.

QUESTION: What will we need to bring with us to the meetings?

ANSWER: We recommend that each person have a copy of this workbook so that the group can proceed through the eight beginning sessions together. You may want to have workbooks available at the first meeting or get them to the members ahead of time. (See page 105 for purchasing and ordering information.)

In addition, the following information may be shared with the group:

During the next nine meetings we will be introduced to six dimensions of Christian discipleship—prayer, virtue, empowerment, compassion, proclamation, and wholeness—as seen in the life of Jesus Christ. We will also learn how we can practice the spiritual disciplines that flow from his life and, between each meeting, do at least one of them on our own. We will gather together and discuss our experiences, thereby learning what it means to encourage one another in our individual spiritual growth.

This is a simplified explanation of the nature and purpose of a Spiritual Formation Group, of course. Feel free to modify, add to, or subtract from the above statement or to take a different approach altogether.

BASIC ANSWERS TO BASIC QUESTIONS

You may want to discuss the following questions with all participants before you meet with the group the first time, or you may want to take a few moments at the beginning of the first meeting to address them. If you choose the latter approach, ask each member to read the

Introduction in this workbook before the first meeting. It may not answer all of their questions, but it will give them a sense of the nature of the group.

With that groundwork, your group will be ready to begin the first session!

QUESTION: Should groups be composed of only men or only women, or can they be mixed?

ANSWER: That will be up to you. We have learned that the level of intimacy and sharing is much deeper and develops much more quickly if group members are the same gender. Why? The more a group of people has in common, the more they can relate to each other. They share similar struggles and talk about them with fewer inhibitions. And yet there is something to be said in favor of a mixed group, with its added variety, broader spectrum of life experiences, and differing perspectives. The makeup of the group is ultimately up to you.

QUESTION: Can husbands and wives be in THE same group?

ANSWER: Yes. But many groups that include husbands and wives report that participating together is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it can be a tremendous way for a couple to grow closer, and it adds incentives in the area of mutual accountability. On the other hand, some people report struggling over what they should or should not share. Spouses sometimes hesitate to share a private struggle, feeling that they should try to work it out on their own, thus preventing them from benefiting from the help of the group.

On the other hand, numerous couples form a Spiritual Formation Group by themselves. They meet regularly with each other to review how they are doing and to make plans for the future, sharing their joys and concerns with one another. Whether husbands and wives should be in the same group with other people or with each other depends upon what the individuals find the most beneficial.

QUESTION: Is a Spiritual Formation Group for "saints" only?

ANSWER: No. While the title may sound a bit ominous. Spiritual Formation Groups are designed to meet the needs of people who have little knowledge of the spiritual disciplines and minimal experience doing them. The workbook uses a step-by-step approach to teach and model the disciplines, explaining the "whats" and "whys" and especially the "hows."

Does this mean that the workbook is too easy for the more spiritually mature? No. The exercises that you will do are basic and foundational and meet you where you are. At the same time, they challenge you to move ahead, to grow spiritually.

QUESTION: What can I expect to happen to me in a Spiritual Formation Group?

ANSWER: There is nothing magical about Spiritual Formation Groups. They contain no secret formula and they offer no easy shortcuts. What they do offer is a plan that helps you put yourself in a place where God can transform your life from the inside out.

By providing you with balance (the six dimensions of discipleship), knowledge (the chapter titled "Ideas and Exercises"), and encouragement (the loving accountability), a Spiritual Formation Group can initiate in you a renewed and deepening spiritual life.

With the questions answered, your group is ready to do Session 1 during the next meeting! God bless you in your ongoing efforts to be an effective disciple of Jesus Christ. Always remember that ultimately the work is God's, not ours.