

## SOUL CARE

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Whenever I guide a group through the spiritual disciplines, I ask the question, “What comes to mind when you hear the words *spiritual disciplines*?” Often the response is “fasting” or “working harder” as they study the Bible! While these two topics certainly are part of the picture, there are numerous options for understanding and experiencing spiritual disciplines that become the root of our spiritual formation. Without paying attention to and implementing these valuable and necessary practices, we cannot develop an intimate relationship with Christ, mature in our spiritual journey, or be the witness for Christ to which we have been called. The on-going practice of reflective story telling, reflective Bible reading and listening, reflective journaling, and reflective prayer, to name a few, can become significant experiences within a small group setting.

**Reflective story telling** allows each person to not only tell their own story, but to hear each other’s journey into faith and the unique manner in which the Holy Spirit’s presence guided them into God’s family. Sharing stories are powerful and contribute to the on-going spiritual growth shared between small group members as they travel together throughout the duration of their small group experience. Providing paper and colored pens and allowing time for each person to share their story through creative, or not so creative, symbols illustrating five or six spiritual highs or lows in their life starts an amazing bond of self-disclosure and trust. It is informative and sometimes emotional, yet it is an important discipline that should be used to launch each new small group as they begin the “knowing one another” process.

**Reflective Bible reading and listening** are strategic elements of the disciplines. Many small groups are excelling at studying the Bible with integrity, discovering the many important details through inductive process, and accumulating an impressive amount of knowledge. However, until the knowledge moves the twelve inches or so from the head to the heart (the stage where we actually reflect on the importance and implement that knowledge into our lives), the knowledge is powerless. I like the expression “blending our belief and our behavior.” Reflective reading and listening requires slowing down, a time of silence, solitude, and focus on small portions of Scripture. How can this discipline be implemented into the life of a small group? How do we hear and recognize the voice of God?

In our Soul Care Retreats ([www.LeadershipTransformations.org](http://www.LeadershipTransformations.org)), we often use the illustration of teaching a young person about different instruments. If the flute is the focus, how does one recognize its sound in the cacophony of many? To first hear the flute

play in isolation helps to distinguish the flute when playing with a group such as a symphony orchestra. I often think the warm-up time with the dissonance and chaos is a better challenge in hearing the sound of the flute...or the sound of the voice of God. We learn what God’s voice sounds like from God’s Word, other people, nature, history, and stories of people’s lives that speak God’s truth, but it takes practice!

In a small group, the practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, can easily be implemented. Taking a short verse such as, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” and having the group be silent and reflective for a few moments is powerful. Ask the right questions of the Scripture and have small group members respond. For example, Psalm 23:1. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Reflect, ask, respond. “Who is the Lord?” “What is a shepherd?” “What does He do?” “I don’t need a shepherd. I’m fine.” “The Lord does that!” “But I do want. Maybe I do need a shepherd.”

Group *lectio divina* can easily be used within the small group setting. Pick a short passage of Scripture. Read the Scripture aloud twice and have small group members quietly reflect. Ask, “What comes to mind?” Ask group members to express their reflection in one word with no explanations. Have someone different read the passage once again. “What new thoughts come to you?” Have them explain a bit further. A third person reads the Scripture once more. Ask the group to interact with the Scripture and its implications. Practicing this discipline once in a while during your worship time is beneficial!

**Reflective journaling** can develop in many creative ways. Not everyone likes to record their reflections, yet the challenge to do so often inspires and encourage others in their development of the discipline. Describing interactions with God and His Word are depicted through descriptive language, art, poetry, and often music! Small group members become amazed at their hidden or unused abilities and various manners of expression. Ask the small group to focus on a short passage of Scripture during the week and report back with the reflections. If you are using a guide book for study, ask group members to journal their reflections on how they responded to the application of the study. Encouraging this discipline will expose small group members to the discipline of silence and solitude where they will begin to recognize the voice of God.

**Reflective prayer** is a discipline that is most often omitted in a small group setting. We have several organized ways of efficient prayer methods for our limited time together. Make a change and

introduce reflective prayer into your small group by helping members be more aware of the Holy Spirit's leading in each individual life. Most small groups spend far too much time explaining prayer requests that pertain most often to "friends" or "relatives." Revisit your covenant and consider spending prayer time on the small group members' concerns only. Developing this discipline allows, during the progression of time, for each member to "log in" as to what is happening in their life in response to the group or individual prayer. Each person is allowed a designated time slot to report back to the group. Other group members remain quiet and do not ask questions but learn to listen reflectively. Learning to observe where God is working, the Holy Spirit is moving, and Christ's Words empowering, can then be prayed back to each member. I have often witnessed the power of this discipline in a small group setting.

Space does not allow full development of the ideas presented here. Forming a small group to participate in these practices is certainly worth offering as an option at your church. I call them spiritual friendship groups, and we meet once a month. Doing this allows more time for silence, solitude, reflection, journaling, and prayer. Offering exposure to and encouragement to understand spiritual disciplines with a willingness to practice them is foundational to

spiritual formation in each person's soul. When small group directors practice with leaders (perhaps through the venue of a small group retreat), leaders practice and encourage their small group participants weekly, and small group participants individually practice and grow spiritually, it makes a huge impact on the church family and the community in which each individual lives. Listed below are small group guide book resources you might want to consider:

*Spiritual Discipline Series*, Dr. Richard Peace, NavPress.

*Companions in Christ*, Upper Room Books

*SoulShaping*, Douglas Rumford, Tyndale House Publishing

For individual daily practice of silence, solitude, and reflection with the use of Scripture according to the church calendar (includes additional devotional reading):

*A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, The Upper Room

*A Guide to Prayer for those Who Seek God*, The Upper Room

*A Guide to Prayer*, The Upper Room