

Spiritual Friendship Guidelines

1) The basic rationale of it.

Friends are a necessity for every follower of Jesus. We need to follow Him with friends who are like-minded. Spiritual friendship is a model where fellow believing friends help one other in their common journey towards Christ-likeness in a life of ups and downs. Proverbs 17:17 tells us, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity".

The truth is that we are unable to connect with the same degree of closeness to all our friends. Therefore, we would need two or three friends where we can be authentic with one another. And this is done in a safe place where whatever is shared between the group is not to be shared elsewhere. The objective of this is to learn from the lives of each other and to gain and mature in the attitudes and virtues of Christ.

Most people see the necessity of this but do not have the time capacity to do so, especially in a busy society like Singapore. The spiritual friendship concept helps us to achieve this need.

2) The concept

Spiritual friendships are forged in small groups of 3 (maximum 4), who meet for 2 hours once a month, over a meal. The 'spiritual friendship' concept can be found in Dr. Tan Soo Inn's book, '3-2-1: Following Jesus in Threes'.

Why three or four people?

Spiritual friendship sees discipleship as a mutual walking with one another, towards maturity in Christ. This involves "friendships" rather than having a "leader" and "followers". In a small group of 3 or 4, each person brings in their perspective from the Scriptures and their life experiences that God has brought them through to edify one another. In this way, each member learns from one another. Any more than 3 or 4 will create too big a group where they may not be willing to share deeply, authentically and openly. A smaller group will also ensure each person has ample time to share in the group.

Frequency and duration of a meeting

A simple way to make the most of our time is to intentionally coincide our meals. We then meet for 2 hours or more. This is so that there is time to share details and areas of our lives. We also meet once a month. This all is very doable for us. Each group may decide to meet longer and more frequently if the group sees the need and agrees together to do so.

3) What goes on in a meeting

Eating together –We strongly suggest meeting over a meal as people tend to slow down from their hectic schedules. The meal should preferably be in a place that provides privacy and is quiet enough.

Conversations – This is the heart of the meeting. We share and listen in love. In this setting, Christ always has to be the centre of it, so the conversations are very intentional and the meeting is not just a chit-chat and “makan” session. We purpose to open up with our struggles, our joys, our hurts, and our sins with each other. This is all done knowing that it is a safe place to share, so what is shared is kept within those four walls. The purpose is so that we don’t have to be alone and we can have brothers and sisters to journey life alongside towards Christ-likeness.

A good way to begin is for each member to share one joy and one struggle in their lives. And as we share and listen, we support each other and challenge one another to grow in their walk to follow Christ. As the members grow in the closeness of each other, we also share how our personal walk with God, important relationships, church/ministry areas, and work-life are going. Mutual confession of sin is one of the key spiritual disciplines that we practice in a safe place. This is so that we can hold each other accountable and help one another to avoid falling into sin.

Prayer –The natural response of the issues shared in our conversations is prayer. We turn our eyes from our circumstances to Christ, in faith and dependence on our God. If they are meeting in a public place, perhaps they could pray with their eyes open, speaking in a normal conversational tone so as to not attract unnecessary attention.

Setting a date for the next meeting – The group then decides the next meeting date and time before they close off the meeting. This meeting has to be a priority in each person’s life, to uphold the meeting unless there is an emergency situation.

4) What is a member of the group supposed to do at a meeting?

Each member ought to be intentionally listening. This requires putting others first and holding back our own agendas.

We also share our own lives openly, with the trust between each other that is it a safe place to share. This will take time. The goal is not to help people merely feel good, but to guide and exhort each other according to the Word of God. Each person would have to gently confront their friend if a person is acting in a way that compromises their walk with the Lord.

The group then prays for one another, submitting one another to God, as they journey towards Christ-likeness.

This works only if there is a high degree of honest sharing between the members

5) Guidelines to forming Spiritual Friendship Groups

Conviction – The first step is to be convicted of the importance of spiritual friendships. This reflects in the commitment to grow in Christ-likeness. Each person must also be convicted that having spiritual friends is important in their Christian walk.

Prayer – Before you form a group, come to God in prayer, committing the people that come to your mind that you think that you can form a group with. You probably would have people in mind that you had existing interaction with.

Invitation– Then after your time of prayer, approach these persons and share your desire to form a spiritual friendship group. It will be quite clear that there is a consensus among the three or four of you that you have prayed for that this is the way to go.

Reviews

We suggest giving a review after the first 2 months (at least two 2 meetings), to see what went well and what could be improved. The group review should also decide if they would like to continue the commitment to the group or not. In the scenario that they say no, the group should bless each other and encourage them to pray for new people to start their spiritual friendship groups with.

If the group continues, reviews should be done every 6 months. This may be lengthened to a yearly review, according to the discretion of the group. This is because people are more willing to commit when they know that they are not locked into a commitment perpetually.

Authenticity – Each person shares their lives deeply with each other according to the degree they are ready. With this sharing, the group members help one another process, challenge, and encourage to grow in those areas that were shared. The members do not have all the answers and should not be giving solutions, but they ought to walk and journey with one another through the struggles, joys, decisions, and life as a whole. Members may give advice when necessary.

Confidentiality – Spiritual friendships that are authentic requires a high level of confidentiality. Each member must agree at the start of the group, that what is shared between one another stays there. The group is a safe place to share their deepest hurts, struggles, and issues of their lives. If any person wants to share with anyone outside the group, he/she must first get permission from the person and the group. We also accept one another as fellow brothers or sisters, knowing that we are all sinners in need of a Savior, that is Christ. We must not condemn one another.

Biblical Authority – Each member of the group may have different opinions on various issues. However, the group should not turn into an intellectual debate. We agree on the essentials of faith and practice, and together, submit to the Word of God as our final authority.

5) FAQ

Can my group be from 2 different genders?

Members of each 3-2-1 groups must be from the same gender as the depth of sharing may lead to inappropriate emotional relationships. Camaraderie among the same gender also often develops faster when the group is comprised of the same gender: a “brotherhood” or a “sisterhood”.

Can my group be made up of couples?

Spiritual friendship groups should not be made up of one or more couples. The reason for this is that if the person has struggles in the marriage, he/she would not be able to share the issues in the group where their spouse is.

Is age a factor in my spiritual friendship group?

Age difference is not as important as the maturity of the group members. This is because spiritual friendship groups work like mutual accountability groups. Therefore, the compatibility of the people in the group is most vital in any group.

Do Spiritual friendship groups replace cell groups, fellowship groups, or church services?

No. Though spiritual friendships give us a deep level of accountability and authenticity with other believers. However, it does not provide us the diversity of people in our other groups such as cell groups, fellowship groups, and congregational services. We need to gather in unity with the other parts of the one body in Christ, learning from them, fellowshiping with them, and loving them.

Can my spiritual friendship group do a book study together?

Studying the Bible is always beneficial and crucial. However, the main purpose of spiritual friendships is to journey through life with each other. There is a time and place for more focused bible study time such as cell groups or bible study groups. Therefore, spiritual friendship groups ought to make the most out of the meeting time to share deeply with each other their lives.

What do I do if my group decides to close?

The group should bring closure by meeting one last time. During the meeting, they may encourage one another and recall the highlights in the life of the group. The group should give opportune time to thank God for His blessings in each person’s life and the group. This will aid each person in their start to find new spiritual friends.

How many spiritual friendship groups can I have at one time?

It is recommended that we are involved in only one group at a time. This is because it requires a high commitment of energy, attention and time.

What if members in the spiritual friendship groups are very young in the faith?

If each member is young in the faith, perhaps a mentoring relationship should be done on top of spiritual friendships.

What is something is shared among the group requires external help?

We act in love, if it’s a sin/struggle/physical or mental illness that needs more help. The group members need to gently speak to the person in love, to refer the person to the pastors/medical professionals accordingly.

Citations:

Tan, S.-I. (2013). 3 2 1: Following Jesus in threes. Singapore: Graceworks Private Limited.