



FREE GUIDE

FACILITATING SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN TEAMS

AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK
"LEADING TOGETHER"

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FACILITATING SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN TEAMS

An Excerpt and Tool from "Leading Together"

The concept of "spiritual formation" acknowledges that only the Holy Spirit transforms us¹ and that God often transforms us amid trusting relationships with others. Thus, we want to create an environment that fosters the Holy Spirit's work in us within the community. Chapter six mentions glory sightings as a helpful practice to create a transforming environment in team meetings, as we are reminded of God's activity in, around, and through us. We also constantly acknowledge that fruitfulness comes only as we abide in Jesus as he abides in us since apart from him we can do nothing.² What are some other practices that facilitate spiritual growth in our teams? In his book *Invitation to a Journey*, Robert Mulholland describes "spiritual formation as (1) a process (2) of being conformed (3) to the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others."³ We help create an environment that fosters spiritual formation and growth when we have an intentional process for being conformed into the image of Christ. Inherent in this definition is the reminder that we are bearing fruit "for the sake of others" and not for ourselves. The critical practice needed here is accountability for such growth. In other words, we need an environment and intentional processes for purposeful accountability in relationships.

Most of us have convictions about what the Lord wants for us as a next step, but we seldom grow consistently without these accountable relationships. This is why we need formational accountability. In practice, formational accountability looks like people asking specific questions of one another on a regular basis (weekly, as a recommendation) for the purpose of growth. We often begin this conversation by asking people to share how they best connect with God. For example, some will share about how they connect with God best through music, others through study, others in groups, and still others in nature or in prayer. The point of this first question is to remind people that we are all wired differently. We all connect with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, but we do so in a variety of ways. This illustrates the creativity of God but also keeps people from assuming a "one-size-fits-all" approach to spiritual growth.

¹ See again 2 Corinthians 3:17–18.

Having shared about how we best connect to God, we invite people to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal a clear next step in response to this question: **What action(s) do I intend to take to help me more fully abide in Jesus?**

We often encourage people to pause and listen for a few moments and write down one thing the Spirit reveals to them. After those moments of silence, we invite the team members to share what they heard (*their accountability prompts*). Each subsequent week when they meet, they share about how they are doing with those prompts and solicit accountability for each new next step as the Spirit continues to lead.⁴ It is important to note here that many people have experienced accountability, whether in church or another setting, as “shaming” in some way. This unfortunate reality makes it critical to create a safe and healthy environment for spiritual formation.

A few simple guidelines, shared in an opening meeting together, help make this possible:

- Only the Holy Spirit can bring transformation.
- We are not here to fix each other (no offering advice).
- Show respect for every individual in the group.
- Answer in first person.
- Write down team members’ requests for prayer and accountability.
- Leaders are called to apply gentle yet firm means of accountability.

We have already described the first point below in detail throughout the book: **Only the Holy Spirit can bring transformation.** Only God transforms us. We do not transform others, just as we do not transform ourselves. As Paul said, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18, emphasis mine). Notice that we are seeing God’s glory (glory sightings) and being transformed from glory to glory by the Spirit. We can trust that the Holy Spirit will transform us to become more like Jesus, so we must acknowledge that **we are not here to fix each other**—as tempting as that might be. Some of us are “fixers” by personality, while others lean this way simply out of concern and empathy for what others are experiencing. There are some, though, whose attempt to fix others reveals their own insecurities. An insecure person will always be driven to provide answers and fix people’s problems. For those of us like this, everything comes back to our security and identity needing to be in the Lord. We must learn to trust that others, just like us, are the Lord’s beloved and that the Lord is able to work in them without our help.

² See again John 15:1–11.

³ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15.

⁴ See chapter four, *Leading as a Means of Grace*, for reminders of those instituted means of grace that the church has always emphasized. One of the goals of our spiritual formation is to consistently practice these means of grace, while remembering that only the Holy Spirit transforms us.

This desire or need to fix others often leads us to give advice or attempt to counsel people as they share. For instance, as someone shares in a team about a struggle they have, the “fixer” immediately remembers a similar experience and shares it in an attempt to help.

Unfortunately, even if the intent is to help, those who receive unsolicited advice are often hurt by it. In fact, gurus in spiritual formation, as well as those who research the psychological and emotional dynamics of group interactions, use the language of violence to describe how people experience being “fixed.” We must therefore avoid these temptations. Leaders must articulate guidelines and watch for any attempt to fix, as it can damage both people within a group and the group itself.⁵

By trusting the Holy Spirit’s work in one another and avoiding the temptation to fix, we can show respect for every individual in the group.

Ultimately, this guideline is a reminder that we are all made in the image of God, which gives us eternal value. Respecting one another in this way allows us to embody the kind of spiritual leadership that has already been described through this book.

The next bullet indicates that we will answer in first person. It is impossible to be held accountable for something we want someone else to do. For example, a pastor may name that what he really needs is for his staff to do something.

A denominational leader may say, “If I could just get those pastors to...” A husband may say, “If my wife would only...” The guideline of answering in first person is a reminder that we must reflect with the Holy Spirit on what we are being called to do and ask for accountability around something we have some measure of control over in our own lives.

Next, we **write down requests for prayer and accountability**. We do this for at least three reasons.

- First, writing down team members’ requests helps us remember. If we are going to hold one another accountable, we must remember what those requests are so that we can pray and ask one another in subsequent meetings about our progress in grace.
- Second, writing things down conveys value to the one speaking. If I record what you are sharing, I show you that I am listening and care about you; that you are important to me and to us as a team.
- Third, recording these items prevents people from interrupting one another or not fully listening. Writing things down invites the whole team to lock in on what is being shared with each person and keeps us from interrupting or ignoring one another.

⁵ As a side note here, many of us (perhaps all) would benefit from getting the help or advice of a counselor, a psychologist, a coach, or a spiritual director. Those relationships, however, are specifically set up for such advice to be given by professionals who are both good listeners and are well trained to respond to crises. I have a coach and a spiritual director myself for these reasons. When we are coaching, we often recommend this process for those who need it or seek it, and we remind the team that counseling one another or giving advice is outside of how the team should operate.

Finally, leaders are called to apply **gentle yet firm means of accountability**. This final guideline reminds us that true accountability requires both the gentleness that is a fruit of the Spirit and the ability to truly lean into the challenges together. Grace meets us right where we are but loves too much to let us stay there. We each have value just because of who we are in Christ, but we are also provoked to grow more deeply into the image of Christ.

In addition to the above-mentioned steps of formational accountability (sharing how they best connect with God and what actions they intend to take to more fully abide in Jesus), **teams will often worship together, share Scripture with one another, and choose a shared devotional pattern or process to follow on a daily basis**. When doing so, these teams will share reflections from their daily times of prayer and Scripture reading as part of their regular team meetings.⁶ As we aim of creating space for worship and conversation around Scripture is to respond to God's grace, mercy, and love with worship and surrender, which will lead to us becoming more and more like the One we worship. A byproduct of all these practices of spiritual formation is deepened relationship and trust in the team.

Finally, to create an environment that fosters transformation, it is crucial to pray together. If we truly believe that only God brings transformation and that fruitfulness comes as we abide in Jesus, then prayer must be a practice that is more than a bookend to each meeting.

We want all our interactions to be bathed in prayer and for even our conversations with one another to be prayerful. In practical terms, this means we have times of focused prayer and specific intercession for the team and for one another, but also for the mission God has called us to and for those we are called to serve.

One of my favorite quotes on prayer is from John Wesley, who said, "Whether we think of or speak to God; whether we act or suffer for him; all is prayer when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him."⁷ We often ask teams how they define prayer and why prayer is important. Then we ask them to reflect on Wesley's definition and its implications.

Wesley seemed to think that everything could be prayer if the love of God was inherent within it. *What does that mean for every aspect of our work when we are facing adaptive challenges?* It means that focused and dedicated prayer is critical if we are to see the fruitfulness we long to see. I believe that even our conversations with one another can be a form of prayer if we are seeking God and discerning what seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us. I say this because I have witnessed the Holy Spirit working during a conversation among team members where there is unity of purpose and love, which results in holy "ahas" that lead to fruitfulness.

⁶ Examples of a shared devotional pattern or process include Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, Revised and Expanded Edition, 2019), using the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church

It is also crucial that prayer for one another and for the mission and community are intentionally integrated into the team covenant. (See Appendix B.) As part of this covenant commitment, teams often pray in pairs or smaller groups—and may even have a prayer partner outside of team meetings. Many teams have a prayer champion of sorts, who may be a person particularly gifted in intercession or discernment, who helps to guide this process. It is helpful to intentionally structure time for listening to the Lord and sharing what we hear and see from God with one another. Once again, if God is the source of the transformation we want to see, and we want to join Jesus in mission and bear the fruit of the Spirit to the glory of God, then prayer must be an integrated part of our lives, both as spiritual leaders and as organic teams.



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