

SouthEastern Yearly Meeting

SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM

2015

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I. Introduction

Welcome to SEYM's Spiritual Formation Program. Spiritual Formation Programs have a long and respected history among many religious groups, including the Religious Society of Friends. Both Philadelphia and Baltimore Yearly Meetings have collaborated and published their entire programs on the web in order to serve as models for others. Many yearly meetings in the United States have adapted these models to meet the particular needs of their constituent meetings. SEYM is pleased to welcome you to our program.

The work of Spiritual Formation Programs is accomplished within a small group format. You may have heard such groups referred to as "circles of trust," "circles of light," "friendship circles," "spiritual companion groups," etc. SEYM prefers to call the small groups "spiritual companion groups."

The primary goal of a spiritual formation program is to deepen one's relationship with the Divine, God, Spirit, or Inner Light through four major avenues: reading devotionally, individual spiritual practice, deep listening and spiritual community. Walking the spiritual path along with others in the group tends to lead to the formation of meaningful and long-lasting relationships. The transformative work of spiritual formation inevitably contributes to the spiritual well-being of the individual, the monthly and yearly meetings.

Assumptions

Those who are interested in spiritual formation groups are usually seeking particular kinds of experiences. With that in mind, the following assumptions are made:

- Participants are seeking a deeper relationship with God or Spirit.
- Friends and attenders want to increase their awareness of and attention to Spirit moving in their lives.
- Seekers believe in and trust the Inward Teacher, the Light, the Guide, however expressed. It is that which we call forth from each other.
- All have an intention to be respectful and open to the views and beliefs of each person in the group.

Expectations

A few things are considered necessary in order for the group to run smoothly and to create a space that allows spiritual growth. Therefore, the following expectations apply:

- Everyone is committed to attending group meetings, which may on occasion need to be rearranged to accommodate special events.
- Everyone is committed to share (speak) from their own lives and experience. Deeper sharing will develop as trust deepens.
- All are willing to focus on and listen deeply to other members of the group.
- What is shared in the group will be held in the strictest confidence by all.
- Everyone agrees to develop or continue a daily spiritual practice for the duration of the program.
- All agree to cooperate with the reading schedule as best they can.

II. The Spiritual Formation Program: Monthly Meeting

The structure of SEYM's Spiritual Formation Program is simple. The program is held over a period of 6 months. It is recommended to occur between October and March, or November and April, during "the season" in Florida. However, it can be held in any consecutive 6 month period that is best for the Meeting.

When a Meeting is ready to begin such a program, an organizational meeting is announced to Meeting members/attenders. The organizational meeting is usually conducted by one or two seasoned Friends, perhaps from Worship and Ministry, or Ministry and Counsel Committees. The meeting opens with a period of centering worship. General information (as in this document) is presented verbally to all present. It is especially important to review and stress information about "sharing," "listening" and "responding."

There follows a period for clarification, discussion and answering questions. When all is clear, those who are interested and ready to commit to the Spiritual Formation Program make themselves known to the presenters.

The presenters assign interested participants to small groups of 6 or fewer members, the ideal being between 4 and 6. Experience has demonstrated that letting those interested set up their own groups has not worked well. If the Meeting is fortunate enough to have more than one group of interested people, the presenters try to vary the degree of Quaker experience (or "seasoning") within a group. Couples are asked if they wish to be together or separate. Some flexibility in re-assigning group members may be necessary. As an example, there may need to be an evening or weekend group for working people, but an evening group may be unsatisfactory for people who do not drive at night. Once assigned, the groups gather to determine a time when all members can meet together.

When each knows when and where his/her group is first meeting, the groups are complete and are set for the duration of the program. That is, the groups are closed. The readings schedule and copies of this document are distributed to those who do not have access to SEYM web page. The organization meeting closes with a period of silence.

The last task for the presenters is to notify SEYM's Spiritual Formation Program contact person that your group(s) is underway. The current contact person is Nancy Fennell, nancyfen38@outlook.com, 239-437-4615.

III. The Spiritual Companion Group

Structure

Most Spiritual Companion Groups meet in someone's home or other comfortable, quiet, private place. It is ideal if the meetings can occur in the same place throughout the program. Meetings are held twice a month for a period of 6 months, such as the second and fourth Wednesday or first and third Saturdays of each month. The group determines the date, time and place. Meetings usually last between 2 and 2 ½ hours, depending on the size of the group. Obviously, a group of three will not need as much time as a group of six. It is important to hold to the time allotted.

In order to reinforce that this is not a "social" gathering, it is recommended that no food be served before, during or after the meeting. Group members usually bring their own drinks. Thus, the "host" need not serve the group and can focus on her/his own participation in the process.

The group does not have a leader. Someone in the group is asked to serve as convener for the 6 month period. The convener is asked to:

- Remind group members before a scheduled meeting.
- Read the opening reminder about intended focus (see below) and lead the group into the opening silence.
- Keep track of the time during a meeting to assure that all will have a chance to speak/share, calling everyone back to silence when sharing or responding goes on too long for time allowed or drifts into discussion.
- Lead into and break the closing silence.

Task

The major and essential responsibility of the spiritual companion group is to establish and maintain a safe space where intimate spiritual sharing may be done. As Parker Palmer states in *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004):

"A circle of trust has no agenda except to help people listen to their own souls and discern their own truths...Its singular purpose is to support the inner journey of each person in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her own Inner Teacher.

A circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly...with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up. The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the Inner Teacher and in each person's capacity to learn from it."

(Note: Palmer uses the term 'circle of trust' which is similar to what SEYM calls 'spiritual companion group.')

Clearly, the spiritual formation group is not centrally a social group, a discussion group, or therapy group. It does not follow our usual conversational patterns. Rather, interactions with each other are thoughtful, supportive, encouraging, and intentionally focused--whether vocal or silent. Again, Parker Palmer instructs us,

"In a circle of trust we are governed by a simple rule: 'No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.'"

Format

A typical Spiritual Companion Group meeting would flow through the following basic format:

Centering: The convener reads the opening reminder about focus and attitude when all have gathered. The group settles into a worshipful silence.

Sharing: Group members take turns speaking from the silence. Some groups prefer to move in order around the circle, keeping to the rhythm of sharing followed by reflective pauses.

- As speaker we draw from our own spiritual experiences, addressing what is of concern in our individual spiritual life at the moment. ***Our own stories are the focus of what we share***, not ideas for discussion, not other people's stories. Bringing forth struggles, fears, confusion and pain, as well as our joys and successes, leads us to deeper understanding. We might ask ourselves: what is my Inner Teacher or Guide leading me to explore, understand, know, or experience at this point in time? What has inspired me since the group last met? Where is God leading me? Where is God in my life now, today?
- It is sometimes helpful for the speaker to look into the middle of the circle, rather than directly at others. Similarly, closing one's eyes may provide the same freedom from distraction.
- We are not in this experience by ourselves. Kind and loving fellow travelers are with us on this path. Most importantly, Spirit is with us and will guide us; we need only become trusting, open and receptive.

Listening: While the speaker is sharing, the rest of the members of the group are listening intently, empathically, worshipfully, entirely focused on what is being communicated. We are not judging, nor are we anticipating how to respond to the speaker. Rather, we are seeking to be receptive, accepting and understanding.

"To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another." ---Douglas Steere

Responding: When the speaker is finished sharing, a brief time is taken for the rest of the group to give affirmation, care and encouragement. Members of the group may also ask clarifying questions. When appropriate, deepening, thoughtful, non-judgmental, Spirit-led questions may also be asked. It is always appropriate to simply hold the speaker in prayer.

- **Remember: Do not fix, save, advise, or set each other straight.** This characteristic of the meeting's process is by far the most difficult for the listeners. People complain that "it doesn't feel normal not to rescue, help or advise." And, it is difficult not to share that you have had a similar experience and how you dealt with it. However, a spiritual companion group is different by design. Group members are asked to believe in and trust the speaker's Inner Teacher. Spirit is present in the group and with the person sharing. We want to give support and encouragement, but to leave the solution between the speaking soul and God.
- After responding briefly, the group returns to the silence and reflection and awaits the next person to share.

Review: After all have had a chance to "speak to their condition," and if time allows, the group may want to review how the meeting went and to make suggestions or raise concerns about following process.

Closing: Once again the group returns to the silence that has surrounded the meeting throughout and centers into a period of worship. The convener closes at the end of the time limit.

Preparation for Group Meetings

Preparation for Spiritual Companion Group meetings is achieved through two experiences, in particular: daily spiritual practice (discipline) and following the requested reading schedule. Certainly prayer and reflection are important, as well.

- **Spiritual Practice:** It is expected that group members will carry out a daily spiritual practice of at least 15 minutes duration. The first group meeting and readings focus, in part, on spiritual practices. There are many approaches to spiritual practice; we are seeking a practice that brings us into a closer relationship with the Divine. Some time-tested examples are: devotional readings, Bible or other spiritual readings, lectio divina, journaling, meditation, prayer, art work, hand work (sewing), music, singing, chanting, walking, t'ai chi.
- **Readings:** Much work has gone into the reading list and it is often reviewed and revised. Some group members will love the list, others may not. Some will have read most of the list; you are invited to re-read the listings, as you are not in the same place you were when you last read the book or pamphlet. You are encouraged, also, to read devotionally, rather than to rush through just to finish before the group meeting. How the readings impact you, draw you out, or bother you is all material to be shared with your group and you are encouraged to do so. Many people keep a journal of their thoughts from the readings, favorite passages, or confusing and troubling parts, and bring the journal to the group meeting in case they are moved to share from it.

The First Group Meeting

The first time the Spiritual Companion Group comes together is a time to meet each other spiritually, to discuss spiritual practices and to ask and answer questions about the group process. The format of the first meeting is somewhat different from the format of the meetings that will follow.

Centering: Opening worship remains the same. Once centered, group members speak from the silence.

Meeting each other, spiritually: Group members will have prepared for the first group session by thinking ahead of time about what they would like others to know about their spiritual life. Allow approximately 15 to 20 minutes, or less as is comfortable, for this introduction. Some examples of questions that may be worthwhile to consider are:

- What is your spiritual/religious background?
- What were some formative early spiritual experiences in your life?
- What has your spiritual journey been like?
- What helps you to feel closer to Spirit?
- How have your images of God changed over your life?

Spiritual practices: Participants will want to share with each other their experience with daily spiritual practice. What has worked for you as a spiritual practice? What has been, or is, difficult about spiritual practice?

The rest of the first meeting follows the usual format of listening, responding, reviewing and closing described above.

IV. What's next?

At the conclusion of the 6-month program, it may be helpful for participants to meet with Worship and Ministry or Ministry and Counsel to share their overall experience in the program. In addition, SEYM plans to hold a guided interest group at yearly meeting sessions, asking that all who have completed the Spiritual Formation Program since the last Gathering meet and share their experiences.

What becomes of the spiritual companions group after the six month period? While SEYM's Spiritual Formation Program concludes after twelve sessions, it is up to the group members to determine what is next, if anything. Some groups continue to meet for a while, some for many years, some remain friends but wish to move on in a different way. If the group decides to continue, questions arise about whether the group, which has been "closed" during the program, remains so or opens to others. Does the group become a reading group, a worship group, a friendship-sharing group, etc.? Discernment and reflection is in order to see where Spirit is leading.

We hope that your participation in your Spiritual Companion Group is a deepening and transforming experience. Many blessings in continuing your spiritual journey. May you travel as you are led in love and Light.

V. Reminders for Convener to Share before Group Meeting

Reminders about focus and attitude are listed below, one for the first group meeting of the month and the other for the second meeting. The convener reads the reminder and leads directly into opening centering silence.

First month:

- Group meetings should be conducted with a prayerful, reverent, contemplative attitude.
- *"We grow toward true self in a space where our growth is not driven by external demands but drawn forward by love, into our own best possibilities."* ---Parker Palmer

Second month:

- In group, we practice attentiveness to God and to each other. We are, thus, a form of "holy accompaniment."
- We refrain from asking forced or prying questions quickly. We wait to sense the leading of the Spirit in our responses.

Third month:

- *"We are all equally invited to receive God's love and guidance."* ---Martha Grundy
- *"When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored."* ---Parker Palmer

Fourth month:

- *"No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight."* ---Parker Palmer
- *"So in our journey together, it is important to inquire into the character that God wishes to call out in each of us...[the character] that God has always intended and yearned for us to become."* ---

Lloyd Lee Wilson

Fifth month:

- *“Silence is God’s first language, everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God.”* ---W. Paul Jones
- Our questions are for the benefit of the speaker, not the questioner. Spirit-led questions or comments lead to more depth, more inward exploration and an increased connection with the Inward Teacher.

Sixth month:

- *“In a small group for spiritual growth, we strengthen and encourage each other’s prayerful listening to the Spirit, we support each other’s discernment and ongoing spiritual journey, and, perhaps most important, we know that we are deeply cared for.”* ---Nancy Bieber
- *“We strengthen the spiritual unity of our religious society only by sharing our religious experiences and understandings at the deepest level.”* ---Bruce Birchard

VI. Spiritual Formation Group Reading List And Schedule

You are invited to read devotionally and encouraged to journal as you read. You may already have read some of the Quaker classics listed. Don't hesitate to read them again; you are a different person now and the readings will speak to you in a different way.

There are two books that are foundational to our reading program and are read a couple of chapters at a time, depending on our focus (theme). They are Patricia Loring's *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. I, (1997) and Thomas Kelly's *Testament of Devotion* (1941). You are not required to read, or reread, these books, but it would likely prove beneficial to you and your group.

The only cost to the participant in SEYM’s Spiritual Formation Program is that of purchasing books and pamphlets. Most participants prefer to have their own copy of the foundational books, at least. Any or all of the readings may be available to borrow from your meeting library or from Friends. All readings are available at Friends General Conference Bookstore and/or Pendle Hill Bookstore and may be purchased on-line or by email (PH).

There are two foundational readings each month. Options for additional readings are suggested some months, should you have the time. The group does not plan to discuss the readings directly, as in an analytical discussion. However, you are quite welcome to share how the readings affected you. Journaling may facilitate this avenue of sharing.

Readings By Month

First month theme: Introduction to the Spiritual Life

- *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. I, Patricia Loring, (1997), chaps. 1-2.
- *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, (1941), "The Light Within."

Second month theme: Prayer and Scripture

- *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. I, Patricia Loring, (1997), chap. 3-5.
- *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, (1941), "Holy Obedience."
- **Scripture:** Read one book of the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Psalms, or Philippians.

Optional readings:

- *Beginning Again*, by Sheila Keane, PHP #339, (1998)
- *A Guide to True Peace*, Fenelon, Guyon, Molions, (reprinted by Pendle Hill, 1979.)

Third month theme: Spirituality

- *Listening Spirituality*, Patricia Loring, Chaps. 6&7.
- *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*, William Taber, (1992), PHP #306

Optional readings:

- *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. Numerous re-publishing dates. Original text from 17th century.
- *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Ed. by P. Moulton (1971).
- *The Prophetic Stream*, William Taber, PHP #256.
- *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, Ed. Douglas Steere, (1984)

Fourth month theme: Testimony

- *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, Chaps: "Simplification of Life" and "The Eternal Now."
- *The Testimony of Integrity*, Wilmer Cooper, PHP #296.

Fifth month theme: Community

- *Bible*, 1 Corinthians, Chaps. 12 & 13.
- *Testimony of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly, "The Blessed Community."
- *Members One of Another*, Thomas Gates, (2004), PHP #371.

Optional readings:

- *Beyond Consensus*, Barry Morley, 1993, PHP #307.
- *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faith Church Community*, by Sondra Cronk, (1991) PHP #297.

Sixth month theme: Ministries

- *The Bible*, Acts of the Apostles
- *Tall Poppies*, by Marty Grundy, PHP #347, (1999).

VII. Yearly Meeting Responsibilities

The following details the role of the Yearly Meeting in supporting the Spiritual Formation Program:

- A small committee of 3 is needed to carry out and fulfill the duties required to maintain the Spiritual Formation Program (SFP). It is expected that the SFP committee will serve under the guidance and care of the Worship and Ministry Committee (W&M) and will report directly to W&M on a regular basis. It is advisable to have at least one member of W&M on the SFP Committee.

The SFP Committee has the following responsibilities:

- The committee prepares the announcements of the Spiritual Formation Program. Announcements should be placed in the DIAs and other appropriate SEYM communication channels. The program encourages meetings to begin their programs in October or November of each year, so announcements need to be made over the summer and early Fall.
- It is recommended that for the first two years of the Spiritual Formation Program an introductory workshop be held during Yearly Meeting sessions.
- One person on the committee needs to be identified as the person to contact to answer any questions that meetings or potential participants may have.
- The committee works with the Administrative Secretary to place all materials relevant to the process and content of the Spiritual Formation Program on SEYM's web page. The materials may need to be updated annually.
- The committee reviews and selects readings and themes used in the program on an annual basis. This important function keeps the program alive, healthy and responsive to participants. It is expected that committee members will make themselves thoroughly familiar with the content and process of the program.
- The committee requests time and space from the Program Coordinator of the Yearly Meeting Gathering Committee to invite all those present who have participated in a Spiritual Companion Group in their meeting since the last Gathering to meet to explore and share their experiences. Members of the SFP committee host this meeting which, by default, will serve as an informal evaluation, providing the committee with important information and suggestions regarding the program.