

Deepening Church Life

Purposes of course:

- To encourage meeting members to talk to each other about important issues in the spiritual life of the local church.
- To enrich the fabric of key components of the spiritual life of the church community.
- To provide a springboard for further ongoing work on areas of shared concern among Friends.

Leadership style: The leader is a facilitator. She or he is not primarily a teacher transferring information or a change agent creating change based on a preconceived agenda. She or he is seeking to provide an opportunity for the faith community to talk to each other about key areas in the life of the community.

How time is spent:

20-25% Presentation of ideas and information

20-25% Work alone or in 2's or 3's

50-60% Various forms of sharing in the group as a whole - e.g. sharing response to a question around the circle, sharing in response to a brief quotation or query, open discussion

Setting the agenda: The facilitator explores with the group requesting the retreat or course (e.g. Ministry and Counsel Committee, Adult Religious Education Committee).

- Find out some of the key reasons why the requesting group is interested in having this course
- Learn the "lay of the land" in the meeting (theological language, places of brokenness, etc.)
- Discern together which of the seven possible topics listed below will be covered in this program

Format: This can be run as either a course taught over a number of weeks or months or as a one day or weekend retreat. Each module or session requires a minimum of 50 minutes (as a class session or session at a retreat) and preferably 75-90 minutes per session.

Selecting modules: Although the sessions are numbered in the handout packet, you may prefer not to do all of these sessions. Your church can identify the issues of most interest to your own spiritual life. The first three are often especially helpful. I would not recommend trying to tackle more than 3 or 4 topics in a single day (morning and afternoon) retreat.

Exploring our faith with each other - living relationship with Christ, language, direct, unmediated ongoing revelation

Deepening Christ-led worship - "gathered" worship, vocal ministry & prayer guided by Christ
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Open-hearted search for unity - group "discernment" in church decisions, listening for the guidance of Christ together

Nurturing gifts in one another - identifying each others' spiritual gifts, naming them, nurturing them, helping each other live them out faithfully as a church community ("eldership")
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The church as beloved community - vulnerability, trust, accountability, love within the church family
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Setting our light on the lampstand - do we hide our light under a bushel, what is holding us back?

Radical faithfulness (prophetic witness) - How Friends can bring a prophetic message to the great issues facing our world today
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Sample class or retreat session (Suggested times can be altered greatly!)

Opening prayer / waiting worship (5 mins.)

Introduction of the subject by leader (5-20 mins.) - It is best if the leader knows the material well enough to talk extemporaneously. Using a flip chart or dry erase board to outline key points can help people absorb what's being talked about.

You may want to leave some time for answering questions. (Others in group may know the answer better than the leader!)

An opening round of sharing in response to a key query: In a not too big group it can be helpful to go around the whole circle and share briefly - e.g. how worship is working for that individual. In a larger group you can share in pairs or threes.

Hearing voice of early Friends. Choose several readings from handout to be read out loud (5 mins.) You may invite Friends to look over a handout and choose a passage to read that especially speaks to them.

Response to readings. Can be done individually via reflection/journaling on queries, sharing in pairs or threes, and/or reflective worship-sharing around the circle. (5-15 mins.)

Exploring what this means for the meeting. A period of worship sharing and/or open discussion diving in more depth on the subject at hand. Try to simply ask evoking questions and then just *listen!* How might the meeting follow up on this subject later? (15-30 mins.)

Closing prayer / worship (5-10 mins.)

Creating a “a safe container” for the course or retreat: It is important that participants in this retreat or course approach these sessions with a deeply respectful attitude towards other participants. The goal of this program is to encourage participants to share openly with each other in a vulnerable and heart-felt manner. This can only happen if there is a spirit of curiosity, trust, and Christian love.

The leader should take time during the first session to discuss how important this is and to work to establish an atmosphere of trust, vulnerability, and mutual respect going into this program. Ask participants to speak for themselves and urge participants to avoid framing comments in terms of disagreement or agreement with previous speakers' sharings.

There are also individual handouts on specific topics that can be distributed as an alternative to or addition to the full packet of materials. (Most of these are already included in the longer curriculum.)

Note: This curriculum is designed for pastoral Friends meetings. The session on worship, in particular, is designed for meetings with programmed worship. An alternate curriculum is available for unprogrammed meetings (entitled “Deepening Meeting Life”).

You are welcome to utilize or edit these materials freely but please include some indication in packets that these materials were originally developed by Peter Blood. I was assisted in working on this curriculum by Becky Ankeny, a recorded minister in Sierra Cascade Yearly Meeting.