



SOULSTREAM'S GUIDE FOR SOUL CARE GROUPS

Introducing the Soul Care Group Guide:
Fostering vulnerability, trust, and deep faith
through small gatherings and guided
discussions.

S O U L S T R E A M . O R G

COMMUNITY

Community is at the heart of the Trinity, and therefore, at the heart of Soul Care groups! Our individual journey toward deeper union with God, if authentic, will lead us into deeper community with others. This is the reason the SoulStream community encourages everyone to become part of a Soul Care group.

OUTCOMES FOR GROUPS

The primary purpose of the Soul Care groups is to create a supportive and loving community that can help members pay attention to how God is working in their lives. It is a place for honest vulnerability. One of the most powerful discoveries in being with community is that God receives us—embraces us and welcomes us—in the midst of deep brokenness. Our inadequacies acknowledged, instead of repelling God, draw us to God and satisfy God’s longing to be merciful. This is the groundwork of community.

The welcome that God extends us,

enables us to be vulnerable with others, develop trust, and form community.

We need a context for continual deepening of faith. To this end, SoulStream has provided an outline that will guide your time in community, including suggested structures for meetings and topics for discussion. We encourage you to explore a variety of prayer experiences and have provided you with the necessary instruction and guidance for each experience.



LEADERSHIP

Soul Care groups are invited to determine on their own the kind of leadership they would like to adopt. Keep in mind that healthy groups usually have someone or a couple of people who are good at drawing people together and keeping the group on task. However, offering each participant an opportunity to lead the group can be life-giving for both those who usually lead and those who don't.

PRAYER EXPERIENCES

The attached pages describe the various prayer exercises you are invited to explore.

SUGGESTED FORMAT

Arrival

- 15 minutes early if possible so that the group can start on time.

Potluck Dinner (if meeting in person).....40 min

- Share a simple meal. While doing so, “check in” to see how people are doing. i.e., Brief sharing of what God seems to be doing in people’s lives. What is God doing in your life?

Silence and Centering.....5 min

- Gather the group.
- Light a candle or use some other image or symbol of Christ’s presence.

Led Prayer/practice and response.....50 min

- Introduce the prayer/practice (E.g., Lectio etc listed below) (5 min)
- Prayer/practice time (20 min)
- Responding together (25 min)

Details, and Closing Prayer (Communion can be included)..... 10 min

- Any administrative or scheduling details. A prayer of gratitude and trust.

BASIC COMMITMENTS: CIRCLE OF TRUST

Offering one another the gift of safe and sacred space

1_ **Be present as fully as possible.** Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes; your listening as well as your speaking.

2_ **What is offered in the Circle is by invitation, not demand.** This is not a “share or die” event! Do whatever your soul calls for and know that you are supported by the church in doing so. Your soul knows your needs better than this written guideline.

3_ **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.** Our views of reality may differ but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

4_ **No fixing, saving, advising or correcting each other.** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us who like to help. But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher [Holy Spirit].

5_ **Respond to others with honest, open questions.** Do not respond with counsel or corrections. Using honest, open questions helps us hear each other into deeper speech.

6_ **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** Turn from reaction and judgment to wonder and compassionate inquiry. Ask yourself, "I wonder why they feel/think this way?" or "I wonder what my reaction shows me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others and to yourself more deeply.

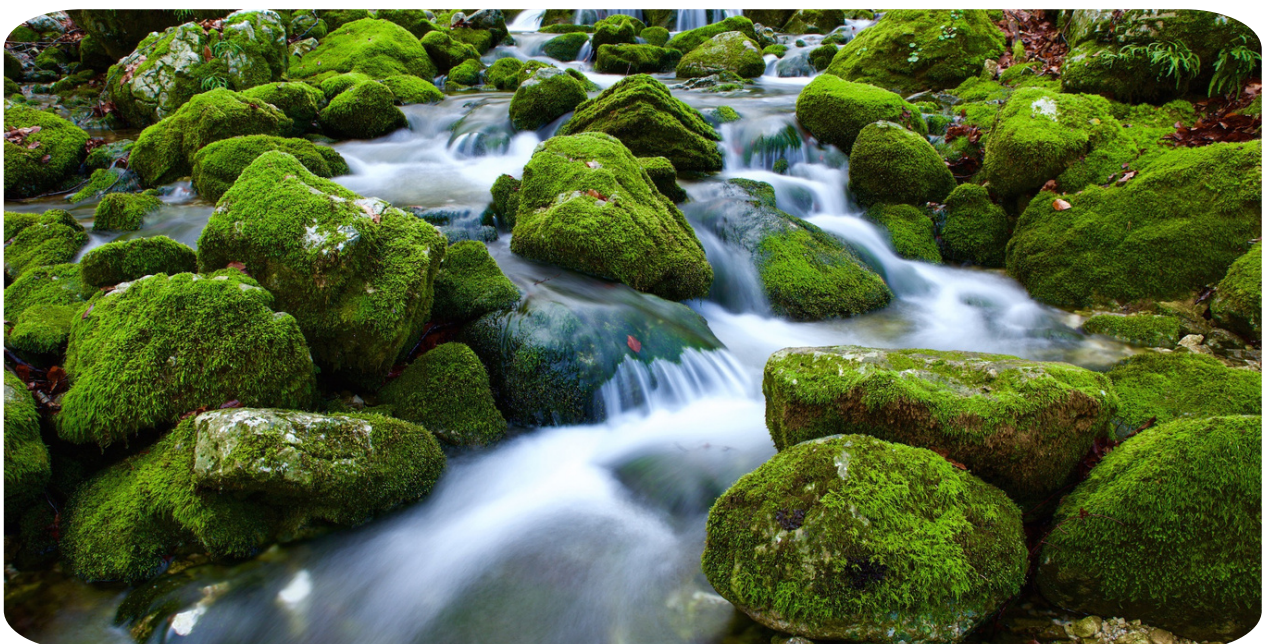
7_ **Attend to your own inner teacher.** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So, pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.

8_ **Trust and learn from the silence.** Silence is a gift in our noisy world and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

9_ **Observe deep confidentiality.** Safety is built when we can trust that our words and stories will remain with the people with whom we choose to share and are not repeated to others without our permission.

10_ **Know that it's possible** to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

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DISTANCING AND “I” STATEMENTS

Some ways of distancing are not helpful, even though they begin with “I”! For example: “I find it very interesting to note that Paul speaks about the wisdom of God being foolishness to people. People just don't seem to get this contemplative prayer stuff.” The topic is good, but the tendency in this kind of communication is to remain analytical and detached. It might be more helpful in the group to say something like, “Paul's statement is really coming home to me as I try to talk to the people in my church about my time at my Soul Care group. I am discovering that I get reactive to their blank stares.”

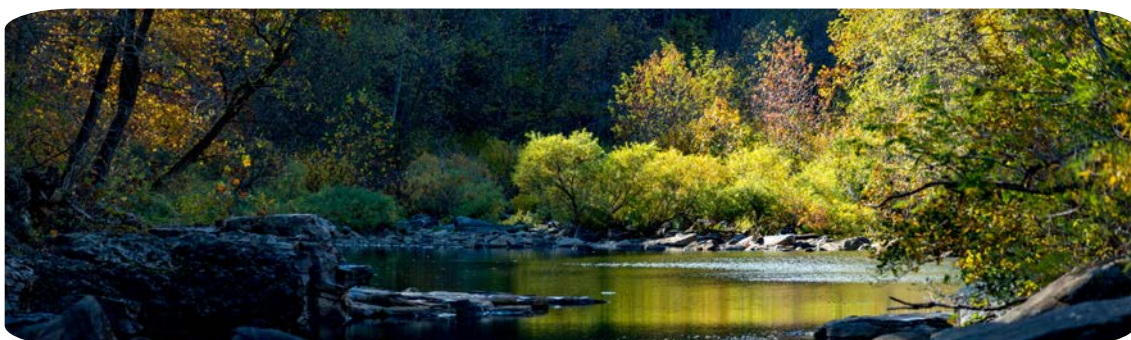
The same kind of distancing is often lurking in statements such as, “I think that it...” or “I wonder if...” or “I would suppose that...” You can almost begin to smell distancing when it happens! There is a big difference between offering one's concrete experience versus sharing thoughts about that experience.

We can also distance ourselves by talking generally rather than specifically. Here is an example:
Distancing: “It always seems as though people become more open to Lectio after they have seen it done a couple of times.”
Deepening: “We have been doing Lectio now for three weeks in our small group, and I am finding that...”

Then there is the old advice giving or preaching way of communicating that is not helpful either: Distancing: “*I found the book helpful because it shows us that we should be more open to God...*” Or: “*The way I read this verse is that it is saying that we must be more careful about what we think about...*” Deepening: “*The book helped me see that God is inviting me to let go of my fear and simply open my heart to God.*” Keep it personal rather than being focused on what the group might learn.

Listen to your own way of speaking. If you catch yourself using these ways of distancing from your own experience, pay attention. And be respectful to the other members of the group by sticking with your own lived reality. Doing that is a great gift to the others, and amazingly enough it might even help you be more attentive to God's encounter with you in your own life!

It will be good if the group can agree to nudge each other gently when the speaking seems to be detached or directed at the others. Keep your nudge in the first person too! You could say, “Am I hearing advice?” or “I seem to be hearing distancing. Could you help me relate it to your own experience?”



OUR HOPES FOR YOUR SOUL CARE GROUP AS YOU BEGIN:

- That the first session would help set a tone of authenticity and vulnerability for your ongoing way of being together as a group. “Start as you mean to go.”
- That you would be invited to treasure your own story.
- That you would grow in appreciation for the unique contemplative journey of each person.
- Each person in the group would be present to the group in such a way as to nurture a safe environment of respect and openness to each other.



SUGGESTED PRAYER PRACTICES

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina (pronounced “lexio”) means Divine Reading and is a slow meditative reading of scripture that allows God to speak to us personally through the text. When practiced in a group, the leader chooses a short passage of scripture ahead of time and leads the group as outlined here. After the lectio, it is often helpful to have a time of personal sharing about how the participants’ lives were touched in the experience.

Preparation: Centering

- Sit comfortably alert with your eyes closed.
- Take a few deep breaths and then begin to breathe normally again.
- Relaxing into your breathing, take some time to let go of the past and the future and come fully into the present.
- Open your heart to Jesus, present to you now.

Listen to your life

- Notice what is emerging with either positive or negative energy.
- Feel the energy of it and open your heart to meeting God in connection with this.
- If nothing arises that is fine. Maybe you will be surprised in the prayer itself.

First Reading: Listen for what is given to you

- As the passage is read, listen for a word or phrase or image that attracts you as you listen.
- Let it enter your heart by repeating it over to yourself softly and lovingly during silence after the reading.
- After a period of silence, the leader invites people to share the word, phrase or image that stood out for them without elaborating on it.

Second Reading: Ask “How is your life touched by what has been given?”

- After you hear the passage being read again, let the word or phrase that stood out for you, interact with your present life experience.
- present life experience.
- What does this evoke in you?
- What part of your life resonates with what is given?
- Allow the connection to arise naturally in your being.
- Sit with that impression during silence.
- After a period of silence, the leader invites people to share briefly how this word, phrase or image has touched their life personally.

Third Reading: Ask “Is there an invitation here for you?”

- After the passage is read a third time, open your heart to consider the connection that is emerging between the word/phrase or image and your life; what might God want to do for you?
- What invitation, reassurance, encouragement, or clarification might God be offering you in this moment?
- Ponder what arises during several minutes of silence following the reading. Trust what comes.
- After a period of silence, the leader invites people to share what God is offering them in this moment.

Conclusion: Rest

- Take time to relax and rest in what is given.
- Don't try to make it bigger or more spiritual than it is.
- Receive what is given with humble gratitude and rest in God's loving work in you.

PRAYING WITH THE IMAGINATION

Overview

Using the imagination in prayer is a way of heightening our sense of awareness and emotional identification in our prayer experience. It has been a normal part of Christian spirituality through the centuries, but it was brought into prominence in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius of Loyola in, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* and through his follower St. Francis de Sales' book, *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Imagination can be used in prayer with any kind of imagery whether scriptural (E.g., the image of God as a Rock) or extra-biblical (imagining yourself receiving a gift). Here we will focus on its use in praying through the narrative passages and especially the Gospel stories.

Praying with our imagination suits the character of stories. Stories are not abstract, conceptual discussions. Any good storyteller will draw the listeners into identifying with the story through the use of sensual detail and dialogue. And the Bible happens to be full of stories!

Here are some basic guidelines and suggestions to help you. Simply review the instructions, read the passage aloud and allow people 20 minutes in silence to pray with the passage. The group may want a reminder 5 minutes before the end so they can converse with Jesus.

Enter the Story

- 1_ Allow time to settle down, become focused and emotionally present
 - Relax your body and your breathing.
 - "Come home" emotionally to your body and away from external circumstances and pressures.
 - Focus on recalling your desire for God to meet you and on God's constant and tender love for you.
 - Ask God for some specific grace for this prayer time. It may be as general as the grace to hear God, or as specific as to experience more deeply what it means to know Jesus in your own life experience like the disciples did in the boat during the storm.
- 2_ Gradually enter the context of the story
 - Read the story aloud then take time to imagine the scene.
 - Use your sensory awareness to notice the physical setting: location (outdoors, the upper room), the weather (hot, dusty), colours, smells, sounds etc.
 - Become aware of the people, their posture, voices and interpersonal dynamics. Who is there? What is happening as the story begins? What emotions are apparent?

Live the Story

- 1_ Become a participant in the story in a way that you can identify with
 - one of the key people (woman at the well, disciple, etc.) or a person in the crowd
 - Be yourself in the story, E.g., if you are Peter in the story don't try to imagine what he would be thinking when Jesus tells him he will deny him three times. Pay attention to what you think and feel when Jesus says the same thing to you.
- 2_ Allow your story to unfold
 - What happens? Who says what? How do the people react?
 - If it is a gospel story, pay particular attention to Jesus, what he says and does, his posture and tone of voice.
 - Notice especially your reactions. What do you feel? What do you say? What do you do? Who speaks to you or encounters you in some way? How do you respond? Again, if it is a gospel story, notice how you relate to Jesus. Don't be afraid to get "up close and personal" with him.
 - You don't have to keep to the biblical story. E.g., If you are Zacchaeus and Jesus asks to come to your house you may respond differently.

Respond to the Story

- 1_ Allow the action to fade, come back to the present and reflect upon your prayer experience.
 - What parts of the story or images were particularly graphic?
 - What responses were particularly intense?
- 2_ Have a brief conversation with Jesus about what you experienced. (5 min)
 - Feel or imagine the Lord's presence.
 - Talk to Jesus about the responses, inner movements, stirrings, attitudes and insights you experienced when you were in the story.
 - Tell him how you felt about how you experienced him or God in the story and what impacted you.
 - Then allow Jesus to respond to you with ideas, impressions, a word, or an action. He might want to shake your hand or hold you close.

Journal your responses and what Jesus seems to say to you

Note whatever strikes you about the experience, especially noting your emotions. Reflect on what those experiences reveal to you.

Deepen Your Prayer (for later)

In the days to come, when you have another opportunity to pray, reread what you wrote in your journal. Go back to the most significant moment in your prayer and start there. Perhaps it was the way Jesus looked at you or a surprising tone in your voice when something happened. Go back into that experience and see what else unfolds.

WELCOMING PRAYER

The Welcoming Prayer is a crucible that can hold our prayer when:

- we are being overwhelmed by an emotion during other forms of prayer
- or at any time in our daily lives when we are troubled by our feelings.

When we find that it is difficult, if not impossible, to let go of an emotion or state of being, we can instead lovingly embrace that state. This is a way of accepting what is rather than trying to push it away. In a profound way, the Welcoming Prayer helps us live the truth that “all things work together for good...” (Romans 8:28).

Note: It is important to note that you are actually welcoming the emotion as the place where God wants to meet you. This is not condoning the situation that produced the emotion.

Move back and forth between these two steps. Don't try to get over the feeling, solve the situation, or make it go away. Rather, just notice and welcome your emotion and God until the overwhelming quality of the feeling begins to subside. Welcome Jesus' presence and love even in the feelings that you experience.

1_ **Let Go:** When you are ready, gently let go of the reactive feeling. Say something like, “I let go of my anger.” Or “I let go of my anxiety.” **It may also be helpful to pray the following as an expression of your deepest desire to surrender to God in the moment:**

I let go of my desire for security and survival.

I let go of my desire for esteem and affection.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and the healing action and grace within.

You are not letting go of your emotion forever. You will certainly feel angry again. As Cynthia Bourgeault puts it, “This is not a final, forever renunciation of your anger or fear; it's simply a way of gently waving farewell as the emotion starts to recede.” It is coming back home to the Center with God.

Practicing Welcoming Prayer

1_ Recall a recent experience which produced a reactive response in you, e.g., anger, jealousy anxiety, etc.

2_ Step back into that experience and connect to the emotional response that gripped you without trying to analyze it, fix it, or justify it.

3_ Welcome the uncomfortable feeling. Let it be a gift to you from your body to focus you in the place where Jesus wants to meet you.

4_ Let go. Using the prayers above (naming the feeling and then naming the desire for security etc), gradually pray a prayer of surrender and allow your focus to shift from the experience itself to God meeting you in the experience.

“Welcoming Prayer is the practice that actively lets go of thoughts and feelings that support the false-self system. It embraces painful emotions experienced in the body rather than avoiding them or trying to suppress them. It does not embrace the suffering as such but the presence of the Holy Spirit in the particular pain, whether physical, emotional, or mental. Thus, it is the full acceptance of the content of the present moment. In giving the experience over to the Holy Spirit, the false-self system is gradually undermined and the true self liberated.”

—Father Thomas Keating, O.S.B.

“Welcome the grief. Welcome the anger. It’s hard to do, but for some reason, when we name it, feel it, and welcome it, transformation can begin. Don’t lose presence to the moment. Any kind of analysis will lead you back into attachment to your ego self. The reason a bird sitting on a hot wire is not electrocuted is quite simply because it does not touch the ground to give the electricity a pathway. Hold the creative tension, but don’t ground it by thinking about it, critiquing it, or analyzing it.”

—Richard Rohr, *Meditation on Welcoming Prayer*, September 2, 2017

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“Longing for God is the most important factor of this prayer, because only on the basis of this inner urge to surrender to God is there hope for progress on this path.”

— Sr. Ludwigin Fabian, O.S.B.

“What God arranges for us to experience at each moment is the best and holiest thing that could happen to us.”

—Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*

“I am where I need to be. Everything around me includes and hides the sacred.”

—Mary Mrozowski

PRAYER OF EXAMEN

The Prayer of Examen was a central part of discernment in the Exercises of St. Ignatius. It helps us gradually learn to attend to the movements of God's loving action in our everyday experience and to notice our response to that action.

Richard Foster explains this ancient practice by saying that we prayerfully reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of our day to see how God has been at work in our lives and how we respond. Perhaps the sunlight glistening through raindrops on a rose fill me with grateful reassurance of God's loving presence. Perhaps my tendency to blame others for my troubles is God's invitation to explore what is bothering me and receive God's compassion.

The practice is both simple and profound. As we come to the Examen, we recall that we are in the presence of God who is holding us in love. We ask the Spirit for help to become aware. We review our day, both the good and the difficult. We give thanks for what has been given and simply ask forgiveness for the ways we have resisted God's action. And finally, we open our hearts to become increasingly responsive to the Spirit's gracious movement in our lives.

Group Examen

Preparation:

- Take a minute in silence to quieten your soul.
- Remind yourself that you are in God's loving presence.

Recollection and Thanksgiving

- Invite the Holy Spirit to bring to mind things in the last week or two for which you are grateful. Express your thanks to God for these gifts. (2 min)

Consolation: Noticing what drew you to God.

- In the silence, ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind a moment in the last week or two for which you were most grateful, when you were most free to give or receive love.
- Don't make up answers. Let them emerge, even if they do not at first seem significant.
- Relive that moment with Jesus. Is there anything else about that moment he would like you to notice? (5 min)

Desolation: Noticing what drew you away from God

- In the silence, ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind a moment for which you were least grateful. Relive that moment with Jesus. Allow Jesus to share with you how he sees things through his eyes of love—without judging, fixing or analyzing. Is there anything about that moment or about Jesus' tone or presence that he would like you to notice? (5 min)

Share

- Invite people to take turns sharing about their consolation or desolation offering without comment.
- Encourage participants to focus on how they encountered God in their prayer as they relived these moments with Jesus. (15-20 min)

Close

In silence, receive what you have been given as a gift and give thanks for your friends. Ask God for the grace you need for tomorrow that has arisen from this prayer. (2 min)