

# LENT 2012 SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP AGREEMENT

## Why a 5-week Lenten small group on Spiritual Growth?

To help recognize that we are all on a spiritual journey, each trying to grow closer to God and each accomplishing it in different ways through different means within different time frames. The Lenten small group study will make us more aware of our journey and encourage us as we encourage others. Each week we study another aspect of the journey to help us sharpen the awareness. There is not one “right” practice, but each of us can actively participate in one or more things that bring us closer to God.

## How will we do this?

- By getting to know one another
- By supporting one another through listening, sharing, praying, and being present to one another
- By discovering meaning in God’s word and applying it to our lives
- By enjoying one another’s uniqueness and appreciating each other’s faith journey

## What are the Lenten small group values?

- We agree to make our meeting a high priority and attend regularly.
- We will pray for one another.
- We will not give advice to one another, attempt to fix or judge one another no matter what is shared, unless we are first asked.
- In order to provide an atmosphere of openness and trust, personal things spoken within our groups will remain within our groups.
- We will strive to become a caring community by sharing our experiences, our struggles, our feelings, our joys, our hurts, and our questions as we may freely decide to do.

## What main topics will be covered?

- Week 1 - Week of Feb. 26 – The Journey of Faith
- Week 2 - Week of Mar. 4 – Wilderness
- Week 3 - Week of Mar. 11 – Unconditional Love of God
- Week 4 - Week of Mar. 18 – Six Different Practices for Spiritual Growth
- Week 5 - Week of Mar. 25 – Continuing Your Journey with God

## What will we do each week?

Our meetings will generally follow this flow:

- Opening Prayer
- Bible study on the week’s topic
- Sharing on the week’s topic
- Sharing about last week’s spiritual exercise
- Closing prayer

## What are the Lenten small group practical arrangements?

- Meetings once a week during Lent for 5 weeks, beginning the week of February 26.
- Each session will be approximately 1 1/2 hours long.
- Each session will include scripture study, reflection on the scripture as it applies to your life, and a spiritual exercise for you to try. **BRING YOUR BIBLE TO EACH SESSION!**

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE**  
**RESPECTful Communication Guidelines**  
**and Mutual Invitation**

**RESPECTful Communication Guidelines**

**R** = take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others

**E** = use EMPATHETIC listening

**S** = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles

**P** = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak

**E** = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions

**C** = keep CONFIDENTIALITY

**T** = TRUST ambiguity because we are NOT here to debate who is right or wrong.

**Mutual Invitation Explanation**

In our small group, in order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak in response to a question, we will proceed in the following way: The facilitator or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Who you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you have something to say but are not ready yet, say “pass for now” and then invite another to share. You will be invited again later. If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE

## SESSION ONE: “The Journey of Faith”

1. Welcome
2. Prayer
  - a. Take some moments of silence to center yourself before the opening prayer.
3. Introduction
  - a. Share your name, where you live, and how long you have been at Peace Lutheran Church.
  - b. Spiritual growth groups are groups of people who come together to encourage their spiritual growth by getting to know one another and sharing their faith journey with each other.
  - c. All spiritual growth groups will have these elements: sharing, study, and prayer.
  - d. We plan to meet for 1 ½ hours. It’s important to stick with this schedule. We want to respect each other’s time commitments, so let’s start and end on time.
  - e. We’ll meet for five sessions only. After that, some of us may choose to continue as a small group, but do not feel you are obligated to continue.
  - f. Review the **RESPECTful Communication Guidelines** on the previous page. Questions? Do we agree to use these guidelines in our time together?
  - g. Review the **Spiritual Growth Group Agreement** together. Questions? Sign and date to show your agreement.
4. Openers
  - a. Review the **Mutual Invitation Explanation** on the previous page. Using the process of mutual invitation, answer the question, “Did you ever feel called to do something? What was it? What determined your response?”
5. Bible Take-off Point
  - a. At each small group session we will have a Bible take-off point. Tonight’s is God’s calling of Abraham (first called Abram) and Sarah (first called Sarai) in the Old Testament. **Read Genesis 12:1-9.**
  - b. What are the promises God makes to Abram? Did you notice these are unconditional promises?
  - c. What does God ask Abram to do?
  - d. How do you react to the following aspects of the story?
    - i. Abram was 75 years old when God’s call came to him.
    - ii. When the call came, Abram and Sarai (with Lot and others) took their possessions and left Haran.
    - iii. When they arrived in Canaan and then again near Bethel, Abram built an altar to the Lord. Why?

6. Sharing

- a. All of us are on a spiritual journey that involves a process of growing. At this point in his spiritual journey, what do you think was Abraham's understanding of the nature of God? As you were growing up, how did your idea of God change? (For example, sometime in early childhood, children will relate more to "Jesus as my friend," than "God as my creator.")
- b. **Read Hebrews 11:8.** Notice the phrase, "*not knowing where he was going...*" Can you relate in any way to this description of Abraham?
- c. What obstacles have you encountered in your spiritual journey? (some possibilities: intellectual problems, tragedy, bad experience with church or Christians, etc.) How did you overcome them?
- d. Can you name a person or an experience that has been significant on your spiritual journey to help you grow in your relationship with God? What was it about the person or experience that made such an impact on you?
- e. **Reflect on Genesis 12:9,** "And Abram journeyed on *by stages* toward the Negeb." Think about the *stages* of your faith journey so far (or *chapters* in your story with God, or *seasons* in your life with God, if it helps to think that way). How would you describe these stages? On what stage of the journey do you find yourself now?
- f. What kind of risks do you take by becoming part of a small group as you are now doing? What are the possible blessings?
- g. **Read Jeremiah 29:12-13.** How do you feel about these promises? What does this passage say about the importance of openness and personal attitude to faith growth?

7. Spiritual Exercise

- a. Each week you'll be invited to try a spiritual practice or exercise. At the next session, you'll be invited to share about the experience.
- b. This week, list three people living or dead, known personally or not, who have impacted you on your faith journey, and list three reasons why each has impacted you. Think of one person whose faith journey you've impacted or you are impacting.

8. Closing Prayer

- a. Offer a prayer in silence for the person sitting on your right, perhaps in light of what the person shared. Say an "amen" as a clue for the next person; continue around the group. Thank the person on your left for his/her prayers.
- b. Facilitator offers final brief word of prayer.

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE

## SESSION TWO: “Wilderness”

1. Welcome
2. Prayer
  - a. Take some moments of silence to center yourself before the opening prayer.
3. Openers
  - a. Using the process of mutual invitation, answer the question, “What is the longest time you have ever gone without sleep (or the longest time without food)?”
4. Bible Take-off Point
  - a. **Read Exodus 16:1-8 and Exodus 17:3-7.** (The Israelites have been liberated from slavery in Egypt and are making their way to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses. They express frustration and discontent in the wilderness.)
  - b. To whom did the Israelites complain? What emotions did they express?
  - c. What was their stated need? What was their unstated need?
  - d. Imagine what life was like when they were slaves in Egypt... How could they complain now that they were freed people?
  - e. How do you usually react to people who complain a lot?
  - f. How did God respond to the people’s outcry?
5. Sharing
  - a. Have you ever expressed negative feelings to God? Have you ever complained or argued with God? Can you share the circumstances?
  - b. How do you feel about Christians who complain or shake their fists at God?
  - c. Many people experience stages of belief and unbelief in their spiritual journey. Has this happened to you? Have you had the occasion to doubt God’s presence and care? During such periods, what consoles you?
  - d. What causes wilderness (dry) periods in our life of faith? Have you ever gone through such a time? Did God provide for you in any way during that period? How?
  - e. What could be the role of the Christian community during times of doubt or drought (“spiritual dryness”)?
6. Spiritual Exercise
  - a. This week’s spiritual exercise: This week, write a letter, poem, or prayer to God reflecting on a wilderness period in your life and how you might have experienced God’s presence. Bring it to the next session.
  - b. Sharing about last week’s spiritual exercise:
    - i. Each week you’re invited to share about the spiritual exercise you tried this past week.
    - ii. How was the exercise to list three people who have impacted you on your faith journey? Was it easy or difficult? Did you notice any common reasons each person impacted you? Was it easy or difficult to think of a person whose faith life you’re impacting? What did you learn from this exercise?

7. Closing Prayer

- a. Offer a prayer in silence for the person sitting on your right, perhaps in light of what the person shared. Say an “amen” as a clue for the next person; continue around the group. Thank the person on your left for his/her prayers.
- b. Say the Lord’s Prayer together.

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE

## SESSION THREE: “Unconditional Love of God”

1. Welcome
2. Prayer
  - a. Take some moments of silence to center yourself before the opening prayer.
3. Openers
  - a. Using the process of mutual invitation, answer the question, “Have you ever been lost or away from home for a long time? How did you feel?”
4. Bible Take-off Point
  - a. **Read Luke 15:11-30** (the parable of the prodigal son). Why do you think Jesus told so many stories in his teaching and preaching?
  - b. Why did the son leave home? What are some possibilities?
  - c. How do you think the father felt about his son’s leaving? Why didn’t he go after his son?
  - d. What caused the younger son to “come to himself”? (verse 17)
  - e. Why would feeding the swine be an especially degrading job for a Jewish young man?
  - f. What do you think the son thought would be his father’s response to his homecoming?
  - g. How would you characterize the older son and his attitude toward his younger brother? Toward his father?
  - h. Was it wrong of the father to throw a party for the returning son? Why or why not?
  - i. Since the word prodigal means “recklessly wasteful, extravagant, or one given to arrogance,” it has been suggested that the story could be called “The Prodigal Father” as much as it is “The Prodigal Son.” How do you feel about this?
  - j. In a way the story leaves us “hanging.” If the story had an ending that brought things to a conclusion, how would you end it?
5. Sharing
  - a. With whom do you identify most? The father? The younger son? The older son? Why?
  - b. When you compare your spiritual journey to the journey of the younger son, where are you now? (in a stage of rebellion, wandering off, feeling in the “pits,” at a point of special insight and resolve, returning home, celebrating your blessings, living with a renewed sense of the gifts in your life and the Father’s love) Where would you like to be?
  - c. If parables are “little stories with a big point,” what is the big point of this parable? How do you react to this sentence: “Grace is not fair” ?
  - d. The word *grace* means God’s unconditional love, undeserved and freely given. It’s been said, grace means that there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.” Share a story of God’s grace from your life experience.

6. Spiritual Exercise

- a. This week's spiritual exercise: This week, choose a verse from scripture that might be called your "affirmation verse," a verse that means something special to you in terms of your values, needed direction, assurance, comfort, challenge, etc. You may choose one from the sheet of **Bible Passages for Learning** or find one on your own. Next week, you will be invited to tell why it is special to you, or what it means to you.
- b. Sharing about last week's spiritual exercise: Last week you were asked to write a letter, poem, or prayer to God reflecting on a wilderness period in your life. What was it like to do this exercise? Was it helpful, easy, difficult? What did you learn? Does anyone want to share their work with the group?

7. Closing Prayer

- a. Offer a prayer in silence for the person sitting on your right, perhaps in light of what the person shared. Say an "amen" as a clue for the next person; continue around the group. Thank the person on your left for his/her prayers.
- b. Facilitator offers final brief word of prayer.



## BIBLE PASSAGES FOR LEARNING

1. Micah 6:8            He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
2. Joshua 24:15        Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.
3. Psalm 27:14         Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!
4. Job 19:25            For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.
5. Numbers 6:24b-26    The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
6. Amos 5:24            But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
7. Isaiah 40:31         Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.
8. 1 Samuel 16:7        But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."
9. Psalm 19:14         Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.
10. Jeremiah 29:11     For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
11. Proverbs 9:10        The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.
12. Psalm 119:105      Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
13. John 3:16            "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."
14. Matthew 22:37-40    Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."
15. John 4:24            "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

16. Acts 5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”
17. Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”
18. 1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.
19. Psalm 37:5 Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.
20. Psalm 50:15 Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.
21. Matthew 7:7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”
22. Psalm 122:1 I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”
23. Psalm 121:7-8 The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.
24. James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.
25. James 1:2-3 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.
26. Matthew 22:21 “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
27. Matthew 5:7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”
28. Matthew 5:44-45 “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”
29. Matthew 7:12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”
30. Matthew 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”
31. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.
32. Matthew 19:5-6 “‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

33. 1 Timothy 6:10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.
34. Proverbs 22:1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.
35. Matthew 7:1-2 “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”
36. 1 Peter 4:8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.
37. Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
38. Revelation 2:10b Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.
39. 1 Corinthians 13:13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
40. Colossians 3:14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
41. Joshua 1:9 I hereby command you: “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”
42. John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
43. Psalm 145:15-16 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.
44. Psalm 103:1-2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.
45. Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
46. John 10:30 Jesus said, “The Father and I are one.”
47. Philippians 2:7b-8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
48. Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.
49. 1 Corinthians 15:19-20 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

50. John 1:29           The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
51. 1 John 1:7           If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.
52. Matthew 16:24-25       Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”
53. 2 Corinthians 5:17       So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
54. Galatians 3:28       There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
55. 2 Corinthians 4:7       But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.
56. Ephesians 2:8-9       For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
57. Matthew 5:16        “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”
58. Matthew 26:41        “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
59. John 10:14-15        “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”
60. 1 Timothy 6:12        Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.
61. Revelation 21:4       He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.
62. Revelation 3:20       “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”
63. Matthew 11:28        “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”
64. Romans 8:28         We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.
65. John 13:34            “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE

## SESSION FOUR: “Six Spiritual Practices”

1. Welcome
2. Prayer
  - a. Take some moments of silence to center yourself before the opening prayer.
3. Openers
  - a. Using the process of mutual invitation, answer these questions:
    - i. Think back to an activity or sport or routine in which you had to practice. What were you doing? What was that like for you? What was the value of practicing?
    - ii. Jesus functions in four main ways in a Christian’s life: Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. In our relationship with him, each of us experiences some of these roles more powerfully than others. Which role have you experienced the most and do you understand the best?
      1. Jesus as my Savior: he forgives my sins and sets me free.
      2. Jesus as my Teacher: he teaches me wisdom and guides me into truth.
      3. Jesus as my Lord: he lives at the center of my life.
      4. Jesus as my Friend: he understands and comforts me.
4. Learning about Six Spiritual Practices and Sharing
  - a. The last question reveals two things about us: first, we’re often quite familiar with one way God works in our lives, and second, we’re often equally unfamiliar with other ways God works in our lives. In our spiritual lives, there are certain “comfort zones” in which we feel secure, but staying in comfort zones sometimes keeps us from growing stronger in faith. Balance is important in our spiritual life. In the life of Jesus, there emerge six distinct areas of a full and complete life with God: 1) devotion to God, 2) virtue in thought, word, and action, 3) empowerment by the Spirit, 4) compassion toward all people, 5) proclamation of the good news of the gospel, and 6) harmony between faith and life and work. Some of us are stronger in some of these areas where others are not. All of us can be challenged to grow in one or more areas. Looking more closely at Jesus, we may gain a better understanding of each of these aspects of spiritual life and learn to incorporate them into our daily lives.
  - b. Turn to the sheets on **Six Spiritual Practices and Suggested Spiritual Exercises**. Read the introduction, and take turns reading the heading and part a) of each of the six spiritual practices to get a better idea of what they represent. For now, skip over the Scripture Passages and Suggested Spiritual Exercises.
  - c. Now that you have an overview of the six spiritual practices, each person choose one you’d like to explore this session, and take a moment to look up the scripture passage. Think about these questions:
    - i. How did Jesus live this practice (not just in this scripture passage but throughout the Gospels)?
    - ii. Why is this practice important for us as followers of Jesus?
    - iii. How have you practiced this tradition in your life?
    - iv. Is this spiritual practice natural or unnatural, easy or difficult for you?
    - v. How do you think you might grow in faith if you were to more intentionally practice this tradition?

- d. When everyone has mostly finished the previous exercise, take time to share some of your answers to the questions in c) above.
5. Spiritual Exercise
- a. This week's spiritual exercise: This week, choose a spiritual exercise from one of the six spiritual traditions listed on the sheets on **Six Spiritual Practices and Suggested Spiritual Exercises**. (Feel free to adapt or change the spiritual exercise if you have another idea that would fit that tradition.) It does not have to be the same tradition you've chosen to explore in this session. Choose a tradition that either seems to fit you well on your faith journey or that challenges you in a new way on your faith journey. Be prepared to reflect on the experience next week.
  - b. Sharing about last week's spiritual exercise: Last week you were asked to pick an "affirmation verse," a Bible verse that means something special to you in terms of your values, needed direction, assurance, comfort, challenge, etc. Share your "affirmation verse," why you chose it, and how it speaks to you.
6. Closing Prayer
- a. Offer a prayer in silence for the person sitting on your right, perhaps in light of what the person shared. Say an "amen" as a clue for the next person; continue around the group. Thank the person on your left for his/her prayers.
  - b. Say the Lord's Prayer together.

References: *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Group*, by James Bryan Smith with Lynda Graybeal, a *Renovare* resource for spiritual renewal; and the *Renovare* website [www.renovare.us](http://www.renovare.us).

## Six Spiritual Practices and Suggested Spiritual Exercises

The following comes from *Renovare* resources. *Renovare* is an effort founded by Christian writer Richard Foster and committed to the renewal of the church. See [www.renovare.us](http://www.renovare.us).

**Introduction:** Jesus gave us a complete picture of God, and demonstrated how we can experience vitality and fullness in our life with God (Colossians 2:9, John 10:10). The historical church (Christians), despite its divisions and differences, has upheld the core characteristics of Christ's life through what we now call traditions. Taken together, these traditions help us envision a balanced spiritual life. They serve as a guide to help us take on the life of Jesus—to become like Jesus ourselves—and as a result to be transformed from the inside out.

### 1. Practicing the Prayer-Filled Life (our heart's steady attention on God)

- a. **The Contemplative Tradition** continually draws us into love for God, reminding us that the Christian life is less like a rulebook and more like falling in love. It stresses the value of silence, solitude, and prayer as ways we engage with God's presence, whether we take a silent walk in the early morning, ride the bus to work, wash dishes while the kids nap, or even take a nap ourselves. As Teresa of Avila described, contemplation is "an intimate sharing between friends," in the time or manner that works best for you and God.
- b. **Scripture Passage: Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46, Mark 14:32-36.** Jesus was a very busy person, but many times in the Gospels, he takes time to be with God. The central focus of his life was his relationship with the Father.
- c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise:** Set aside 5-10 minutes each day for prayer and devotions. Spend the time either in silence enjoying God's presence, reading the Bible or a spiritual book that inspires you, or lifting up to God your thanksgivings and concerns (for example, you may choose to pray according to the ACTS pattern: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication).

### 2. Practicing the Virtuous Life (responding with integrity)

- a. **The Holiness Tradition** emphasizes the re-formation of our hearts so that we are able to respond appropriately to the challenges of life. The word "holiness" has some negative connotations today, but the original Greek meaning of the word virtue is simply "to function well." Virtuous Life is not about rules or judgment, perfectionism, or some kind of merit gained by good deeds. It encourages us to the ultimate goal: not to "get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us." It is attentiveness to the source of our actions, to the condition and motives of the heart, and taking on new patterns of life that flow naturally from within.
- b. **Scripture Passage: Matthew 4:1-11.** After Jesus' baptism, he was tested by God and tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Jesus remains true to his mission and does not yield to temptation. His responses tell us about the nature of sin and the importance of purity, virtue, and a healthy life.
- c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise: Choose one:**
  - i. Try a 24-hour partial fast (fast from lunch to lunch, skipping dinner and breakfast in between, drinking plenty of water during the fast). Use the time of fasting to "feast" on God, pondering areas for growth in your faith.
  - ii. Go a day without saying anything negative (no judgment or criticism but only positive things), or go a day without saying anything dishonest.

3. **Practicing the Spirit-Empowered Life** (fueling our lives from God’s presence and power)
  - a. **The Charismatic Tradition** focuses on the power of God’s Spirit moving in and through us. Just as a car requires fuel to run, and our bodies require food for survival, so our souls rely upon the Spirit of God for spiritual energy. Through the Spirit we are able to do more than we could on our own steam, and these abilities not only remind us of God’s presence, but equip us to build up our communities in love.
  - b. **Scripture Passage: John 14:15-17, John 16:7-15.** When Jesus tells his disciples he must leave them, he encourages them not to be afraid because they will receive the gift of an Advocate, a helper, the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete* (in Greek), which means “to call alongside.” The Holy Spirit reveals truth, teaches, and guides us, giving us power to live as followers of Jesus.
  - c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise:** If you have taken a spiritual gifts class, look again at the spiritual gifts you identified for yourself, and ask yourself how you are using them to build up the community of faith and serve the world for God. Are any neglected and in need of being stirred up by the Holy Spirit? If you have not taken a spiritual gifts class, look up three spiritual gifts passages (**1 Corinthians 12:8-10, Romans 12:6-8, and Ephesians 4:11-13**) and consider how you have been gifted by God to serve God.
  
4. **Practicing the Compassionate Life** (extending compassion in every sphere of life)
  - a. **The Social Justice Tradition** expresses the themes of justice, compassion, and peace. It emphasizes wisdom and loving-kindness to bring relationships into harmony, unity, and balance, even within our relationship to nature. Compassionate Life takes place in all arenas of life, from personal to social to global. As with the other traditions, the actions we take are not the end goal. True compassion is motivated by a genuine heart, is empowered by the love of God, and embraces the possibility of positive change.
  - b. **Scripture Passage: Matthew 25:31-46.** Jesus shares a story in which he tells his listeners that when they have (or have not) cared for the needy, they have (or have not) cared for *him*. Jesus reveals a God who cares deeply about how we treat one another. “Love God and one another” is the greatest commandment according to Jesus. Each and every human being—in fact, the whole universe—is precious to God. Jesus lived a life of compassion for “the least,” gently mending, healing, forgiving, welcoming, and at the same time, strongly confronting injustice in communities and systems (remember how he overturned the money-changers in the temple and challenged the powerful Pharisees and Romans?).
  - c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise:** Look for an injustice at home, work, church, the neighborhood, or the world and address it in some way. Educate yourself on the issue or concern and take some action. Examine how you yourself might be participating in that injustice without knowing it.



5. **Practicing the Word-Centered Life** (living the life-giving message)
  - a. **The Evangelical Tradition** encompasses much more than simply converting people. The evangel—the “good news”—is God’s great message to humanity: that all can be redeemed and restored to its intended design. This is the message embodied in Jesus himself, rooted in the word of God, and ultimately expressed through the lives of those who follow Christ. It is a living tale of grace spoken in and through word and action.
  - b. **Scripture Passage: Luke 4:16-20a, 42-44.** At the beginning of his ministry goes back to his home synagogue, reads from the Hebrew scriptures, and then declares he’s the one to fulfill God’s promises in scripture. God uses three main ways to reveal God’s self and God’s loving message of comfort and challenge to us: the written word of the Bible, the living Word Jesus, and the spoken word of the proclamation of the gospel.
  - c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise:** Choose one:
    - i. Memorize a verse of scripture and allow God’s word to take root in your thought-life and in your heart. (See Bible Passages for Learning sheet.)
    - ii. Read one of the shorter books of the Bible (such as Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, or Titus) out loud. The Gospels and Paul’s letters were read aloud to the early Christians. Imagine how they would have felt and responded hearing these words.
    - iii. Look for an opportunity to tell someone about your faith without judging or manipulating. Simply share part of the story of God in your life.
  
6. **Practicing the Sacramental Life** (encountering the invisible God in the visible world)
  - a. **The Incarnational Tradition** focuses on the relationship between the invisible spirit and physical reality, helping us to see God’s divine presence in the material world in which we live. God manifests himself in his creation, even in the midst of mundane activities, like work and school and family life and leisure, whenever and wherever we acknowledge God.
  - b. **Scripture Passage: Luke 13:10-17.** Here we encounter the age-old division between work and faith. Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath day and angered the legalists who accused him of breaking one of God’s laws (not to do any work on the Sabbath). Jesus shows us there is no division between sacred and secular, faith and work, in his words and deeds. In everything God is present and active.
  - c. **Suggested Spiritual Exercise:** Do your work and live your daily life this week in honor of God. Whether it is paid work, caring for your family, driving to the store, talking on the phone, cooking a meal, walking around the block, or voluntarily serving others, choose this week to honor God. Live and act as if God were visibly present observing and listening to everything that you do.

Want to study the six spiritual traditions and practice each of them more fully? Talk with Pastor John or Pat Ferguson, Small Group Coordinator. If there are enough interested people, we may form a small group in the future to meet for eight sessions using *Renovare’s A Spiritual Formation Workbook*, which looks at each spiritual tradition in depth, one per week (together with an introductory and concluding session), and offers many more spiritual exercises for participants to practice each week.

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUP PARTICIPANT GUIDE

## SESSION FIVE: “Continuing Your Journey with God: Letting Go”

1. Welcome
2. Prayer
  - a. Take some moments of silence to center yourself before the opening prayer.
3. Openers
  - a. Using the process of mutual invitation, answer the question, “What is the hardest thing you’ve had to give up or let go of in your life?”
4. Lectio Divina (Divine Reading)
  - a. In the season of Lent, we journey with Jesus to the cross, where he is crucified, and we experience the amazing depth of God’s love for us and our broken world. Lent is often a time when people choose to “give up” what might be distracting them from a closer relationship with God and to “take on” what might help them grow closer to God. In so doing, some of these changes may be incorporated into life year-round. Lent can be a time to think of the big picture and to seek to get our priorities in line with God’s priorities.
  - b. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus was arrested, he spent some intense time with his Father God in prayer. As we read the story, we’ll use a process of reflecting on scripture called *lectio divina*, or “divine reading.” You may choose to incorporate this process for reflecting on scripture with other small groups or Bible studies or in your personal devotional time (although it works better in groups). The passage will be read three different times, each with a different question to hold in your mind and heart during the reading. Following each reading, there will be an opportunity to share using mutual invitation.
  - c. Step 1: **Read aloud Luke 22:39-46.** Listen for God’s Word as it touches your life - notice a word, a phrase, or image that “shimmers” – that jumps out at you or sticks with you.
    - i. Your word, phrase, or image:  
\_\_\_\_\_
    - ii. Using mutual invitation, share your selection with the group without commenting on it.
  - d. Step 2: Read the scripture passage aloud a second time using a different reader. Notice some feeling or experience in relation to the word, phrase, metaphor or image.
    - i. Your feeling or experience: \_\_\_\_\_
    - ii. Using mutual invitation, each person shares a second time his/her feeling or experience. Accept sharing without discussion; use “I” and “me” language – avoid we, us, and you. Be comfortable with silence. Listen and receive another’s story as a gift.
  - e. Step 3: Another person read the scripture a third time. Ask, “What is God inviting me to do, be, or change with this reading? Am I being called to some action - now in this setting, in my relationships with family, work, leisure?”
    - i. Take 10 minutes for reflection, journaling, art, or prayer. This step is done in silence.
    - ii. Using mutual invitation, share any beckonings to action or decision.

5. More Sharing

- a. **Read Luke 14:27.** Jesus tells his disciples, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” The cup (from the previous lectio divina passage from Luke) and the cross are powerful images. Both require that we “take them up” (in other words, they are things we must make a decision to willingly do or take on for the sake of Christ). One way to think about bearing the cross is to recognize that Jesus sometimes calls us to give up our “druthers.” (For example, I’d rather spend every Friday night watching TV. I’d rather not have to deal with that person. I’d rather spend time hangout out with my friends.)
- b. In order to follow the “beckoning” or calling to action you talked about in the last section, what “druthers” might you be called to give up? Please share with the group. Remember, there’s a “cost of discipleship.” Let’s not kid ourselves... to follow Jesus means letting go of some of the things we grasp most dearly.
- c. Final thought: How are we able to let go? Only through the strength and guidance of God who speaks and works through scripture, friends, family, the church community, worship, prayer, the sacraments, other people’s examples, etc.

6. Spiritual Exercise

- a. Sharing about last week’s spiritual exercise: Share about the spiritual exercise you chose from the six spiritual traditions. Was it natural or unnatural for you? Easy or difficult? What did you learn? How did you grow? Can you see incorporating this into the pattern of your life? Would you like to try a spiritual exercise from a different spiritual tradition? Go for it!
- b. Think back on these five weeks. How have these sessions helped you grow in faith or become more aware of God’s presence in your life?
- c. Into the future, think about the spiritual exercises we tried during these five weeks. What practice or practices might you incorporate into the pattern of your life so you might keep growing in your relationship with God?

7. Closing Prayer

- a. Offer a prayer in silence for the person sitting on your right, perhaps in light of what the person shared. Say an “amen” as a clue for the next person; continue around the group. Thank the person on your left for his/her prayers.
- b. Each person complete the phrase, “Thank you God for...” and offer each petition one by one, with the facilitator closing the prayer.

8. Encouragement for the Journey

- a. God’s blessings as you continue the journey with God!
- b. Keep in mind Jesus’ words from **Matthew 28:20**: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age,” and the psalmist’s words in **Psalms 121:7-8**: “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.”