

SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT GROUPS

What they are, How they work, and How to start them¹

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up.” Ecclesiastes 4:9

“... encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Heb. 3:13

“Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Heb. 10:25

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Christians are not meant to be loners. God calls us to live together as members of the body of his Son, Jesus. Solo-Christians typically suffer (i) stagnation, (ii) depression, or (iii) distraction. Vigorous interaction with other believers is essential for spiritual health.

Mutual ministry takes place in a variety of contexts. It does so in the home, in meetings of the congregation, in smaller group meetings, and in ministry activities. Many Christians also need the intimacy and accountability of spiritual encouragement groups (SEGS) to remain vibrant.

HOW SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT GROUPS WORK

SEGS are groups of 2-4 people dedicated to encouraging one another in their spiritual lives. Group members meet as fellow Christians – not as leader/follower, teacher/disciple. All participants interact as equals in Christ.

They are built around four activities aimed at producing genuine spiritual encouragement – sharing, learning, watching and praying.

- **Sharing** – SEGS are about encouraging one another, not teaching one another. Encouragement requires that we share our lives with one another – that we let each other know where we are and what is happening to us. It’s helpful to share
 - *our struggles* – problems, fears, personal weaknesses that we grapple with.
 - *our blessings* – the things we have learned, received, been able to do etc.
 - *our aspirations* – the ideas and ambitions that burn in our hearts – the things we would like to do for the Lord.
- **Learning** – Spiritual life is anchored in Christ and is nourished as we understand and respond to what we learn of him (Col. 2:6). Consequently SEGS need to be centred in the Word of God. We can encourage each other in shared learning through
 - *studying the Bible* together with a special interest in its practical relevance to our lives. Academic or intellectual group study belongs to a different setting - it will quickly kill a spiritual encouragement group.
 - *sharing insights* from our own Bible study
 - *discussing helpful books* together, again, with a view to gaining a deeper knowledge of the Lord and being encouraged to serve him more faithfully.
- **Watching** – accountability to others is something we usually try to avoid, but it is often something we need. It can be an incentive to faithfulness. It need not be threatening and invasive. It can be a positive blessing, especially if we use it as a help to achieving
 - *our spiritual goals* – by sharing with other group members what we want to achieve in our spiritual lives they can become encouragers to us in our pursuit of them.
 - *our mental and physical goals* – serving God means that we honour him with our minds and our bodies too. We can share with others our physical and mental goals and ask them to help keep us up to the mark.

¹ The inspiration for this article came partly from reading Jerry Bridges’ helpful book, *The Crisis of Caring* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), and partly from attempts to put these ideas into practice with students at Grace Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand. Chapter 5, of *The Crisis of Caring*, entitled “Spiritual Fellowship,” is worth reading in conjunction with what has been written here.

- *our family goals* – family responsibilities often get neglected by busy men and women. It can be helpful to let others know your goals and needs so that they can help you be more faithful.
- *our work goals* – letting others know what we are wanting to achieve at work again provides accountability and opportunity to encourage.
- **Praying** – SEG members pray with and for each other. They encourage each other by
 - *thanking God* for the blessings he has given them
 - *asking God* for help in areas of struggle or need
 - *seeking God* for grace to serve and grow

These activities don't always need to be in this order at a meeting, or in the same order each time. Sensitivity to the Spirit and to personal need should determine how things are done.

Someone generally needs to lead a SEG meeting, but leadership can rotate from week to week. Gifted leaders should try to teach others to lead. Leaders must always be careful to facilitate participation rather than dominate the meeting.

MAKING SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT GROUPS WORK

Above all things, *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ* is needed to make a SEG work. His presence and blessing cannot be organized, but must be specifically sought and his leadership through the Spirit must be honoured. Group members must be sensitive to what grieves the Spirit and be ready to put things right when they have quenched his fire.

SEGS need to be *Christ-centred rather than man-centred*. They aim at encouraging one another, but do so 'in Christ.' He is the source of a Christian's life, the goal of his service, the rule for his conduct. Spiritual encouragement is all about helping people attain "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Correspondingly, SEGS must be *Bible-centred*. We learn about Christ and receive the grace of Christ through the Word of Christ. Personal experience must never dominate in a wrong way. SEGS are not mutual flattery or self-interest groups. They aim at helping people grow in their experience of the grace of Christ. This can only be done as group members anchor their encouragement, instruction challenge and rebuke in the Bible.

Effective SEGS require that people

- *have a genuine concern* to help others. Self-centredness will destroy a SEG and strain relationships.
- *be honest* with themselves and with each other. We can only encourage each other when we are honest with each other. Honesty doesn't mean we have to tell others everything about ourselves, but it does mean we are genuine in what we can and do choose to share.
- *be trustworthy*. Gossip, or the leaking of information shared in confidence, destroys the trust needed for deeply encouraging relationships.
- *be committed*. Group members need to attend meetings and need to participate in them. Without this level of commitment, SEGS will never serve their purpose.

GETTING SPIRITUAL ENCOURAGEMENT GROUPS STARTED

- *Try the home first*. Husbands and wives need to encourage one another in their spiritual lives. They often fail to do so because they don't know how to do so. The ideas outlined above are as applicable to the home as they are to any other small group meeting of Christians for encouragement.
- If you want to meet with others in the church, *talk with your spiritual leaders beforehand*. While they don't need to control your SEG group, they should know about it, approve of it, be concerned to know how it is working, and be available to help if help is needed.
- *Pray* that the Lord will provide one or two other Christians who share your desire to meet together for spiritual encouragement. Compatible spiritual maturity is not necessary; a serious

commitment to grow in Christ is. So too is compatible sexuality. Outside the home, men should meet with men and women with women.

- *Decide* on the frequency, place and time of meeting. Always be prepared to be flexible in emergencies, but make sure your meetings are regular and not simply spontaneous or occasional.
- Be sure your new group *understands its goals and activities*. Make it clear from the beginning that a SEG is not a Bible study group, but an encouragement group. Appreciate how the four activities contribute to spiritual encouragement, and keep the goals of each clearly focused.
- *Commit yourself* to being a faithful member of the group. Always attend meetings (unless clearly prevented from doing so), and contribute fully.
- *Be prepared to disperse* a SEG group if it fails (in its goal to provide spiritual encouragement), or in order to initiate other groups.

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