

Preface

God's economy is based on individual people, each with a unique space and identity, each called into being and loved unconditionally in a personal relationship with God.

The way we live and the society we live in make this difficult to realise or experience since personal value and worth are seen as acquired or earned and are based on material values derived from a commercial spirit. This rating of people by output, prowess or appeal has paralysed many in their sense of self-worth and esteem.

This judgement of merit has spawned systems and games for concealing and masking the real person, presenting instead a hybrid self, living up to expectations and idealism while clutching at fragments of authenticity.

The worst is that those parts of oneself that seem to compromise one's value in people's eyes are vigorously rejected and cut off from the self in various ways. Many of the very sides that make up one's personhood are thus estranged and deteriorate further with denial or neglect.

God invites us to take the risk of embracing our whole selves, to venture to accept even those parts that seem troublesome and unacceptable. God's acceptance and love for us is total at this and every moment and with it comes the invitation to leave the binding and blinding issues which close us to life and to drink of the life and choice that Christ has procured for each of us.

'Yes to myself' means taking the risk of accepting God's invitation to become and to love this person God made me to be and releasing my judgements and grievances. My current situation is a subsistence abode with insufficient self-esteem to cover the roof, inadequate trust for walls and an outlook too dim to serve as windows. I am called to risk moving out, moving on.

If I am to risk, I need to trust in God's involvement in my life, knowing that God loves me too much to leave me as I am, and recognising that it takes an unfolding process, sometimes painful, to bring me to my full womanhood or manhood in Christ. Even where my trust is feeble and my appetite for looking inward is faint, God draws me by circumstance and desire.

As I am being transformed and made whole, my movement in response to God becomes an opening acceptance of myself from a place of growing identity and maturity. Dying to myself is then not a subtraction from an already impoverished self, but a free giving of myself from this stream of living water. (John 7:38)

This coming to life involves questioning and clarifying much of what we take for granted. It requires work, an encouraging environment and companions who themselves are on this journey.

This material is assembled for a group of up to eight such people to use in weekly meetings. The regular nature and content of the sessions assures the continuity of the growth process. Because entangling discussions are avoided, each group member is enabled to face their own issues in an unmanipulative environment of trust and support. The unique experience of each person unfolding before us widens our horizons and possibilities.



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Introduction

Community Groups

The primary aim of the Community Group is to promote living and growing relationships of each member with themselves, with God and with others.

Within this group, one is free to explore the different parts of self and how they relate in one's inner community. Only to the extent that we are working and living as an inner community can we enter and relate to any outer community.

A Community Group thus seeks to:

- provide a supportive growth environment,
- create a trusting and accepting community atmosphere,
- enable the individual to explore their life foundations,
- set a tone of caring and sensitive listening,
- provide support and encouragement on one's journey with God,
- help one to be accountable and inter-dependent,
- develop relationship skills.

Responsibility for the group is carried by each member in the group. There is no leader as such, but for each person the sense is that one is in the group as a servant of relationships, one's own and those of the other group members. Thus the group is not 'led' in any direction by a leader but each member, by their presence and responsibility to the group, is helping to create the climate for each person's inner development.

In a sense, the material presented here 'leads' the group. It is suggested that one person be given the role of facilitator each week and if this delegated the week before, that person can read through the material and become familiar with it so that when she or he reads it out in the group session they can do it slowly and sensitively, allowing the appropriate pauses and emphases to occur. This role is rotated each week.

Common factors

The group comes together understanding that they share common experiences, for example:

- a life of learned habits and behaviour patterns,
- attitudes and values formed during one's upbringing,
- personal weaknesses and failings,
- a strong and partly distorted image of God and God's demands,
- fear of exposure, pain and rejection,
- anxiety at facing one's painful past,
- a belief that all are wounded and in need of healing.

Although each member is responsible for how much or how little she or he shares, contributes and is involved, it is hoped that the members will be willing to share themselves in a trusting



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way with each other, so that it proves a mutually enriching experience. For this to happen, there will need to be respect for each other and for what is shared. By giving and receiving respect, group members will be building the kind of relationships which will be real and honest and not based on good or bad feelings.

The basis of the group is that we cannot 'save' ourselves, but that growth to freedom is God's invitation and gift to each person. So the main concern in the group is **to listen for God** and not to one another's advice; to sense God's presence and involvement in our lives.

The group does this through the exploration and practice of the way Jesus Christ lived with himself and with God.

Group material is drawn and developed from various sources, but is seen to be only a starting point and a catalyst for personal involvement. It sparks thoughts, meditation and focal points for work and prayer. We are not studying spirituality to gain more 'head' knowledge about it (though this may happen), but to grow in a living experience of it and to come to a place where it shows in our life and manner.

The theory and basic thrust of Christian Spirituality are relatively easy to pick up, but for it to become an integral part of one's lifestyle takes considerably more time, as well as regular review and encouragement. The group material is used as needed, taking as many sessions over each part as the group feels are necessary.

The group is not there for problem-solving, group therapy or discussion, so the process of interaction is important and is initially quite controlled, since one is trying to alter existing ways and habits of being together. Guidelines on group interaction are given in the next section.

The growth of the group or the depth to which it can move is dependent on the commitment of its members and needs a certain level of responsibility and resolution to function. This does not demand any special skills or abilities, but simple relationship commitments such as regular attendance, confidentiality, a respect for one another in the community process and being as honest as one is able at the time. The expectation of commitment without any 'realistic' limit can be suffocating and binding, so it is wise to commit yourself for a set period of time, for example three or six months. Then see how you feel about your commitment, before making a further appropriate commitment. All members must, however, commit themselves to attending every weekly or fortnightly meeting.

What happens in the group, and especially in yourself, needs to be kept confidential. The group will falter if what is said in confidence leaks out and your own growth can be hampered if you speak about new insights before they have become a living reality.

The commitment to the group is as much a commitment to yourself, and this needs to be undertaken with some basic ideas about this process in mind. This time of life needs a rhythm of daily reflection and growing in awareness with time available for meditation or any other inner work that needs doing. In your daily experiences and your emotional responses to them, be aware of how they relate to your growth process. You need to stay with any material that has been particularly meaningful and return to it to explore areas that may need further attention. You need to live with your questions, recognizing that any answers that come will be incomplete and can lead on to deeper questions and fuller perceptions.



There is nothing magical about this group and what it will do for you. A lot will depend on how seriously you take your relationship with yourself, since this one is the basis of all other relationships. You will be challenged to make changes to the way you think and act, to the way you treat yourself.

This is not a project in the normal sense of the word, but a life process. The process is already under way and has its own energy and direction. With the greater awareness will come a clearer course and finer sense of growth which, in fact, requires less 'work' to sustain. It is just the initial breaking out of old patterns that will take some resolve.

Group Guidelines for Sharing

The following are guidelines for group interaction in a situation where a group is working on personal growth and deepening of individual relationships with God. By the nature of such exploration, the risk for each group member is considerable and if there is to be a greater trust in the group, then the guidelines need to be observed carefully.

1. The only appropriate matter for any person to be sharing with the others in the group is what that person is experiencing at present. What is current in their lived experience and more particularly, what is being experienced in the meeting as the subject matter unfolds, is relevant.

1. In speaking, stay with 'me' or 'I', and avoid using 'we', 'they' or 'one'.

2. Hopeful comments which evade reality and hinge on words like 'could', 'would', 'if only' etc. need to be avoided.

3. So too should the comments which seek control or bring guilt: ought, must, mustn't, should, shouldn't etc.

4. Do not comment on another person's sharing, either right away, immediately afterwards or during the week. Nor is it to be alluded to in any way or in any situation outside the group.

5. Do not try to 'save' a person from what they are going through. If they are struggling with difficult feelings or needing to weep, it is in order. The best the group can do for that person is to be there for and with them.

6. Do not interrupt or 'chip in' when someone is sharing.

7. Do not give any advice or suggest good ideas. Each person needs to face and stay with their issues until their way forward becomes clearer. Advice from others will lead to opinion swapping and increase the options which only cloud the issue at hand.

8. Do not ask questions of the person sharing unless it is to clarify a point that they have already made, but avoid any discussion on the matter. We may find it difficult to see the way other people see, but these differences need to be respected and, in fact, treasured.

9. Equally, the person sharing is not to ask questions of the others, as this can be a refusal to take their own perceptions seriously. Rather let them stay with the questions, though they may share what these are. Our questions and doubts need to be welcomed and befriended. It is they that, like a team of horses pulling a carriage, will take us on our journey to full selfhood in Christ. When their time is done, the answers, which are unique to each person and to their situation, will come. Cheap and quick answers are like 'junk' food and will not feed the person's real self.



10. The group needs a trusting atmosphere in which to work. Raucous silliness, loud frivolity or jesting, even before or after the meeting, can damage the sense of the seriousness and purpose of the time spent together. It is important not to start the meeting with tea if possible since it becomes difficult to change the mood from light chatter to serious reflection. This is not to say that fun and happy times are not to be enjoyed together. In fact, the group should meet together at least once a month for a meal or some other light and pleasant activity.

11. Try to remain as silent as possible during the reflections. Keep the journal writing till the end, as the scratching about for page and pen can be disturbing. If you feel that you have to write during the silence, then prepare your materials beforehand so that the disturbance is kept minimal.

12. Keep to the point you are making. Avoid moving from the topic you are working with on to something else that occurs to you as you are speaking.

13. Don't worry if you have only a little to share, but make sure you keep what you do share, real.

14. Try to verbalise what is happening in your sense centre, in your heart, as opposed to your head; that is, try to articulate your feelings and sensings.

15. As you listen to each person sharing, listen for that which is communicated without words, which is in the tone, the gesture and posture, the feelings read in the eyes, face and hands. See whether you can perceive your own humanity and the image of God in them.

These points and rules may feel rather constricting at first, since it is not our usual way of being in groups. The purpose is to create as open and neutral an environment as is possible in which each person can be who they are needing to be.

Forming a Group

Because God created us to be in community, most of our growth processes have happened in the context of other people. Our personhood developed as we mixed with them. For most of us, however, our lives with others have been a sweet-and-sour experiences, a life of joys and sadnesses, of hope and disappointment. Since much of the pain that we have experienced seemed to be caused by other people, it is easy to see why we may find it difficult to expose ourselves to others and make ourselves vulnerable to them. Nonetheless, the effect that a small, affirming community can have on our inner growth is very significant. If we can accept that the risk of hurt is always there but that we need to take this risk if we are to grow as people, and that with care and few but clear expectations, we can limit this risk, we will find that even people we would normally consider 'difficult' become treasured journeying companions.

The **guidelines for sharing** have been developed specifically to limit the interference and advice swapping that so easily happens in a group, and to encourage that elusive quality of listening that really hears the whole person. It is a rare gift to have someone to listen to us in a deep, open and uncritical way. As we learn to listen to another person and to hear the words of their heart and not just of their mouths, we will begin to hear the thoughts of our own hearts and to discern God's voice more clearly.



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People wanting to form a group

1. The less the people wanting to form a group know each other the better it is. The things that we have come to know about one another so far can make it difficult to be open to each other in a new way. This is particularly the case with home churches that have already been meeting for some time. It would be better to split a group like this and to add a few new people in order to start with a new group ambience.

16. Each person needs to want to become more real and to play fewer games in relating. No-one should join a group because someone else thinks they should. Each person needs to take responsibility for themselves and stick to the commitment they have made. The first few months will not always be easy as the guidelines for sharing will feel restrictive and one may not seem to be moving much. Be patient if you can; a whole new way of relating may be unfolding and this needs to be given time. Our society's obsession with feeling comfortable will repeatedly cast doubts on what you are doing.

17. This work is a follow-on from a *Foundation Course in Christian Spirituality* and it would make sense to first read the companion volume *Foundations of Christian Spirituality*, so that those wanting to form a group are coming to it with a similar understanding. If this is not available, use other books in the booklist at the end to see whether you have the common ground for the kind of inner work that is anticipated in the group.

For those who do not have the possibility of forming this kind of support group, it is still useful to have someone to talk *to* who can listen and be supportive. It needs to be someone who will not be surprised or shocked by anything that you may wish to explore.

It is also possible to work through this material on your own with the use of a journal where your thoughts, feelings and insights are recorded in some regular way. Clearing the workspace, as it were, by writing things down encourages the process of reflection and increasing awareness which is central to growing in freedom. If issues surface that are scary or cause a lot of anxiety, ease off on them and come to them a lot more slowly and only when you feel strong and well. It may help to find a counsellor to help you unpack these particular areas.

A Preliminary Group Meeting

The following is a suggested routine for people who have met for the first time to form a support group.

Someone, perhaps the one who has invited people to the meeting, can begin the session by reading out loud the section on **Community Groups**.

People can then introduce themselves around the circle sharing something of how they come to be here.

Another person can then read the **Group Guidelines for Sharing**.

Take a few minutes of silence to reflect on what has been read and on the effect it has on you. Does this group feel right for you and can you commit yourself to it for at least three months?

Share again in the group and decide where and when to meet. As there is no leader as such, each person wanting to join the group needs to take responsibility for the group, for its meetings, for its tone, and for supporting each member.



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