



BOOKHAM
BAPTIST CHURCH

Spiritual Friendship: A Practical Guide

By Rev. Steve Elmes



Growing Fruitful Followers of Jesus

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction to Spiritual Friendship..... | 3 |
| So what does Spiritual Friendship Involve?..... | 3 |
| How do we foster Spiritual Friendship in the Church?..... | 4 |
| What biblical examples of Spiritual Friendship are there?...6 | |
| What examples in Church history are there?..... | 8 |
| How the Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced spiritual Friendship..... | 10 |
| So how does all this relate to us at Bookham Baptist?..... | 12 |
| So how do I find a spiritual friend?..... | 13 |
| Spiritual Exercises for the Practice of Spiritual Friendship.. | 15 |
| Further Reading..... | 23 |
| Practical Resources for Spiritual Friendships..... | 24 |



Introduction to Spiritual Friendship

This short booklet has been prepared for the members and regulars of Bookham Baptist Church to encourage the life-giving practice of spiritual friendship and to provide some practical resources for this purpose. It is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the practice, though it will provide some background, some explanation, and a look at the biblical roots of spiritual friendship.

A good place to start is to ask an obvious question: *what is spiritual friendship?* So let's begin with that.

A simple definition might be: *helping each other to grow in our faith and be fruitful disciples of Jesus.* This connects the practice of SF straight away to our **vision** and **values** as a church:



Of course Spiritual Friendship is not the only way in which we pursue our vision and live our values. We do these things through congregational and small group life, as well as through sharing in the ministries of the church and in our everyday lives (whole life discipleship). However, it is one important way in which we seek to grow and be fruitful together in Christ's mission.

So what does Spiritual Friendship involve?

It may help to start with the big picture: of spiritual friendship as a way of describing the how we relate to one another as a

community of friends (and brothers and sisters). The Bible gives us much encouragement to recognise our kinship and friendship in Christ - for which he gave his life on the cross. We have been reconciled to God and to one another by his atoning sacrifice - so our being brothers, sisters and friends is not incidental to our salvation but vital to it, and vital to our mission too.

“...being brothers, sisters and friends is not incidental to our salvation but vital to it, and vital to our mission too.”

How do we foster spiritual friendship in the church?

Larry Crabb, author of *Becoming a True Spiritual Community: A profound vision of what the church could be* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), communicates a deeply inspiring picture of the potential of spiritual community. He acknowledges our tendency to want to solve problems rather than looking for God in the midst of them. Our focus is often on manipulating God to improve our lives rather than learning to worship Him in any and every circumstance. He encourages spiritual communities to walk together in costly brokenness, vulnerability and interdependence. The default for many Christian communities is to operate in what Crabb calls congenial, cooperative, consoling, counselling and conforming relationships, where everyday relationships are distant, functional, conflict-free and soothing and when life gets messy, we call in 'experts' who help us try to solve the situation with our own resources. Crabb urges his readers to be dissatisfied with this model and instead to pursue a life together which requires us to be broken, to love deeply, to avoid quick fixes and to be entirely reliant on the Spirit for our healing. At the heart of this lies the distinction between self-improvement and sanctification (taken from an essay on Crabb's book by Caroline Oliveira)

How do you respond to Crabb's vision of Spiritual Community?

The Bible gives us lots of practical exhortations to love one another strongly.

*Check out these passages as examples:
Romans 12: 9-16, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15, Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2.*

As we respond to these exhortations in our life together we are practicing spiritual friendship - in the broadest sense.

Think about how this works out in practice at Bookham Baptist Church. Where are the opportunities to relate well to one another in ways that bring encouragement, support, insight, challenge, care and wisdom? How do we avoid polite and superficial fellowship?

One of our convictions as a church is that our small groups are vital to developing deep relationships that enable us to care for one another and encourage fruitful discipleship. So small groups are a great context for spiritual friendship to grow and be practiced.



How do you feel your group is doing in this? Does the way the group runs encourage such friendship to be given and received? Is there room for relationships to grow?

If you are not part of a small group, ask yourself why (and maybe talk this over with someone else).

Being more specific...

So we can use the term Spiritual Friendship to speak of a church that is building good relationships to enable spiritual growth. However, there is a more specific meaning, which the rest of this

booklet will be mainly concerned with. I mean the kind of Spiritual Friendship that involves two people getting together with the intention of encouraging spiritual growth in one or both of them. (It could be more than two people - perhaps a triplet or a quartet - and we will come back to this).

What biblical examples of Spiritual Friendship are there?

Read the following passages and jot down the qualities and gifts of friendship that you see in each case. What might we learn about the value of spiritual friendship from these snapshots? Space has been left to write your answers.

Ruth 1:16-17 - Naomi and Ruth

1 Samuel 23:15-18 - David and Jonathan

Mark 9:2-4 and 14:32-34 - Jesus, Peter, James and John



Acts 9: 26-27, 11:25-26 - Barnabas and Paul



Acts 16:1-5 and 2 Timothy 1:1-14 - Paul and Timothy



What examples in church history are there?

The gift of spiritual friendship - sometimes called 'soul friendship' has a long and rich history. It starts in God, who is the source of all love: from the Trinity friendship flows. The passages above show how friendship between fellow followers of Yahweh (OT) and of Christ (NT) provided vital support, encouragement and wisdom to enable growth and faithful service. However, it was in the third and fifth centuries after Christ that the practice of seeking out a specific experienced guide as a soul friend began.

The story of these beginnings is told beautifully by Ray Simpson in his book *Soul Friendship*. Here are a few extracts from the book.

In 313 the Roman Emperor made Christianity a favoured religion. Whereas in earlier centuries to be a Christian was a sacrifice, now it was a social advantage. Christians became attached to comfort, buildings, status and trappings of power. Often their faith became second-hand, their morals became lax and their clergy became career minded.

What were Christians who were hungry for God, and who wanted to learn to live like Jesus, to do? A few of them had already emigrated to the deserts of Egypt, Syria or Palestine to live as hermits, basing their lives on the 'beautiful attitudes' that Jesus taught (Matthew 5:1-12). Now many more joined them. They realised that to advance in the true way of life they had to be free of the distraction of their old way; that time, space and a soul friend were essential if they were to be stripped of self-will, and to grow in holiness...

The first desert Christians lived as hermits far from anyone else; but in time some lived near to others or formed communities...

The older, wiser ones were called 'abbas' or 'ammās'; these were affectionate terms of respect, such as the words 'poppa' or 'mama' might convey in parts of the world. These were sought out as soul friends...

Busy town Christians would make journeys to some wise old desert Christian and ask him or her to be their soul friend for a weekend. Desert hermits would pay visits to one another, and those with the clearest spiritual discernment would bring to light hindrances to spiritual growth in others that needed attention. When Abba Helle was staying with some brothers, they so trusted him that 'When he revealed the secret counsels of each of them, saying that one was troubled by fornication, another by vanity, another by self indulgence, and another by anger, they could only respond, "Yes, what you say is true."'

Ray Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, pp. 46-49

All of this may seem rather strange to us today as twenty first century people - yet, we might recognise the spiritual hunger described above, in ourselves and in others, and relate to the challenge of living authentically as followers of Christ in a culture that is self-obsessed and enslaved by the pursuit of money, sex and power. In that sense, nothing very much has changed, and the widespread longing to discover a deep healing peace (shalom) is still a reality. Spiritual friendship to this end is still a needed gift and practice today.

"The widespread longing to discover a deep healing peace (shalom) is still a reality."

What is your reaction to what you have read about the Desert fathers and mothers? How might their withdrawal to the desert speak to us today? Is it still viable today in some way?

What is your own sense of need for spiritual guidance in your life? How has it come to you so far?

There are lots of stories of the desert fathers and mothers that offer us insight into how soul friendship was practiced.



Here are a few of them...

A brother who was insulted by another brother came to Abba Sisoes, and said to him: "I was hurt by my brother, and I want to avenge myself". Abba tried to console him and said: "Don't do that, my child. Rather leave vengeance to God". But he said: "I will not quit until I avenge myself". Then Abba said: "Let us pray, brother; and standing up, he said: "Our Father... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive NOT those who trespass against us..." Hearing these words, the brother fell at the feet of the Abba and said: "I am not going to fight with my brother any more. Forgive me, Abba."

There were two old men who dwelt together for many years and who never quarreled. Then one said to the other: "Let us pick a quarrel with each other like other men do. I do not know how quarrels arise," answered his companion. So the other said to him: "Look, I will put a brick down here between us and I will say "This is mine." Then you can say "No it is not, it is mine." Then we will be able to have a quarrel." So they placed the brick between them and the first one said: "This is mine." His companion answered him: "This is not so, for it is mine." To this, the first one said: "If it is so and the brick is yours, then take it and go your way." And so they were not able to have a quarrel.

A brother in Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to

which Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to him, saying, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you". So he got up and went. He took a sack, filled it with sand and cut a small hole at the bottom and carried it on his shoulders. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, father" The Abba said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him.

Some old men went to Abba Poemen and asked, "If we see brothers sleeping during the synaxis [common prayer], should we wake them?" Abba Poemen answered, "If I see my brother sleeping, I will put his head on my knees and let him rest." Then one old man spoke up, "And how do you explain yourself before God?" Abba Poemen replied, "I say to God: You have said, "First take the beam out of your own eye and then you will be able to remove the splinter from the eye of your brother."

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: "Father, to the limit of my ability, I keep my little rule, my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and to the limit of my ability, I work to cleanse my heart of thoughts; what more should I do?" The elder rose up in reply, and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: "Why not be utterly changed into fire?"

What do you make of these strange little tales and sayings? Is there one that gets your attention? If so, spend some time with it, open to what God might be saying to you.

The practice of soul friendship has continued through the centuries. It was especially valued by the Celtic church, and later

became embedded in the Catholic and Anglican traditions in the form of spiritual direction - where a more mature and experienced priest might guide someone newly ordained, or a more experienced Christian someone new to the faith. The practice of spiritual direction is very much alive today and Christians of all traditions are discovering its value.

Have you had any experience of spiritual direction, whether in the form of a retreat or meeting one to one with someone to encourage you in your spiritual journey? How did you find this? What was helpful or unhelpful about it?

So how does all this relate to us as members and regulars of Bookham Baptist? Are we going to be sending people to the desert? Do we each need a spiritual director?

Well it would be a 'no' to the desert (unless specifically called). As for a formal spiritual director, some may benefit from that. However, our desire (as leaders at BBC) is to see everyone benefitting from spiritual friendship, which may be in the form of one person guiding another, but might also be a more mutual arrangement in which two (or occasionally more) spiritual friends encourage each other to grow in Christ. So we might think of two basic forms:

“our desire (as leaders at BBC) is to see everyone benefitting from spiritual friendship.”

Mentor - Mentee & Fellow Disciples

Both are of value and may be needed at different times. So for example, when a person becomes a Christian, it can be of great value (and arguably is essential) to meet with a mature Christian to be discipled. Equally, some who have been Christians for some

time may simply feel the need for the wisdom and encouragement of someone who has travelled longer or is walking closer to Christ. Many, on the other hand, will look for a spiritual friendship that brings encouragement to both people. It can work both ways.

So let's get a bit more practical - with some clear responses to some common questions.

So how do I find a spiritual friend?

First step: pray. Seek God about this. Ask him to lead you. Be prepared to wait a few days for some guidance. When you get an idea, then approach the person who has come to mind. Ask them if they would pray about being a spiritual friend to you, and make sure you give the person time to do that (no pressure should be applied). It is important that the other person feels free to say 'no' - so do remind them of this when asking. It is also fine (and probably a good idea) to agree on a one-off meeting to see how it goes.

It is quite likely that many of you already have relationships that bring encouragement and support to your spiritual life - so it may be a case of recognising this and making one or more of these more intentional (by agreement).

Should I seek a mutual friendship or one in which I am guided by another?

Good question. We think that it will depend on what you need at this time. If you are a new Christian, then the guidance of a more mature Christian would be just the thing. Even if you have been a Christian for a while, it still may be the way to go.

We think it is best, on the whole, not to offer to mentor someone, but to be approached for this. Although one of the Ministers or

leaders might well suggest a mentor to someone who is seeking one, and help to make the connection.

Can I seek guidance on who I might approach?

Yes, good idea. You might talk to your small group leader or to one of the ministers or leaders in the church.

Should I seek a spiritual friend of my own gender?

Yes. Given that you will be sharing deeply with one another, there is much wisdom in this being either man to man or woman to woman. This is partly because of the great value of relating in this way, but also because a growing intimacy with someone of the opposite sex might nurture more than discipleship - there are temptations and dangers which need to be avoided.

When it comes to more professional arrangements, like seeing a counsellor or a spiritual director or a pastor, then there are boundaries that provide a safe space for different genders to meet. Yet, as a general rule for our practice of spiritual friendship - let's keep to single gender friendships.

Can a spiritual friendship involve more than two people?

This seems reasonable, though it should be no more than four - otherwise you have a small group! Perhaps it helps to think of two in a spiritual friendship as the usual pattern, with a few exceptions because God loves to work in a wide variety of ways!

How is a spiritual friendship pursued?

We would suggest an initial meeting, to decide together how to do this. This could be a breakfast meeting or over a coffee or a pint - whatever feels most natural or appropriate. At this meeting you can talk about how often you would like to meet (once or

twice a month might be a good starting point) and where (which might vary). You can also talk about how you will use the time together. There are many possibilities. You could decide to keep things very simple: to share each time what is going on in your life and then spend time praying together. Alternatively, you might choose a devotional book of some kind (there are plenty out there!) that will give some stimulus or direction to the time you share together. Or you might pick up on some of the prompts and exercises that make up the rest of this booklet - trying them out to find what works for you. At the end of the day, there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Have a go and see how you get on.

“...there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Have a go and see how you get on.”

Prompts and Exercises for the Practice of Spiritual Friendship

The resources set out in this section are intended for those who are developing a spiritual friendship, but could be equally be used in a small group setting where the group are eager to go deeper with God and with each other. Let's go...

Spiritual Exercise 1

Take it in turns to respond to the question:

'What are God and you working on at present?'

It is a simple question that can prompt a deep response. Make sure you listen well to each other.

After sharing, pray for one another.

Spiritual Exercise 2

Matt Summerfield (of Urban Saints) has come up with some conversation starters that relate to seven aspects of being human. You don't have to work through all of these in one go - rather choose one or two to work with..

SPIRITUAL - What has God been speaking to you about? What are you doing with what God is saying?

EMOTIONAL - What practical and prayerful steps are you taking to address your character flaws? What is going on for you emotionally?

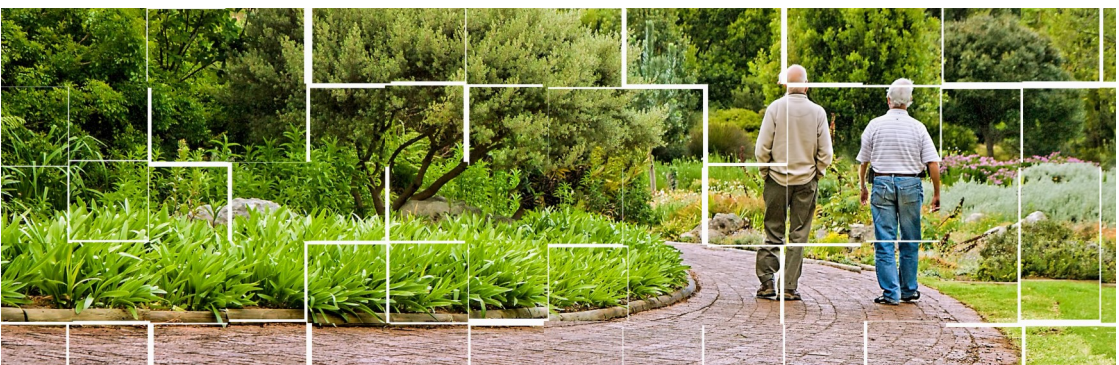
PHYSICAL - What are you doing to cultivate good physical health?

MENTAL - How are you protecting your mind from unhelpful thoughts, attitudes & images?

RATIONAL - What decisions are you facing that need wisdom and courage from God?

RELATIONAL - How can you improve and progress your relationships with people?

MISSIONAL - How are you making a kingdom impact through words, attitudes & actions?



Spiritual Exercise 3

Here are two activities that come from the Emotionally Healthy Spirituality series, one to cultivate silence and the other to encourage a deeper awareness and honesty about your emotional life. These are spiritual disciplines to bring you closer to God and open your heart to him for encounter. These might be practiced with your spiritual friend. You might also agree to practice them in the weeks that follow your meeting and then talk about how you got on the next time you meet.

1 Practice being still with God in silence. Find a suitable place for this and take a few minutes to prepare. It can help to be aware of your breathing for a few moments as a way of settling. Some find it helpful to repeat a word or a simple phrase over and over for a minute or so (e.g., 'Abba Father', 'Be still and know that I am God'). After this, just be still, *not* trying to hear God, just *be* with him. You will most likely find yourself distracted a few times - don't worry about this. Some find it helpful to imagine a basket to toss distractions into (for later) or have a notebook (a real one) handy to jot things down to look at later. Try ten minutes a day. Perhaps write a few lines on how you found the experience.

2 Choose *four* questions from the list below and journal (jot down) your answers. Take about ten minutes for this. (You could do this once or twice in the week ahead.)

What are you angry about?

What are you sad about?

What are you afraid of?

What are you enjoying?

What (whom) do you love?

What are you surprised by?

What disgusts you?

Now take about eight minutes more to answer the following question:

What was it like to journal your feelings?

Spiritual Exercise 4

Agree to prepare a timeline of your life and place along it the big (significant) events that have shaped you. Annotate where you see God's grace at work and the ways in which you have grown. Note the people who have been important to you also.

Bring your timelines to your meeting and share them with one another. Let the conversation develop and pray for each other.

Spiritual Exercise 5

There are times in our lives when our memories are stirred, and sometimes it is worth taking time to listen for what God might be saying. Russ Parker provides a simple way of reflecting on memories. He says that there are three elements to a memory:

- 1 Content = what happened (our recollection)
- 2 Conclusion = what decision or resolve we made at the time (e.g., I will never...)
- 3 Consequence = how that decision has impacted your life

You might like to try this out. Each choose a memory from your childhood that is vivid (nothing too difficult). Relate the memory (content) and then see if you can identify any inner resolves or decisions that you made as a result of what happened (conclusion). Go on to consider how your life has been impacted by what you decided.

After working through this process - with the help of your spiritual friend - consider if you need to repent of the decision or resolve you made and seek to replace it with a good resolve (counter any lies with the truth you have come to learn in Christ) Ask your spiritual friend to pray for release and healing in Jesus' name.

Important note: if you find that you are deeply troubled by memories that are being stirred, you may need to seek some ministry outside of your spiritual friendship. There are some within the church who have gifts in praying with those who are seeking emotional healing - have a word with your small group leader or one of the ministers if you need to.

Spiritual Exercise 6

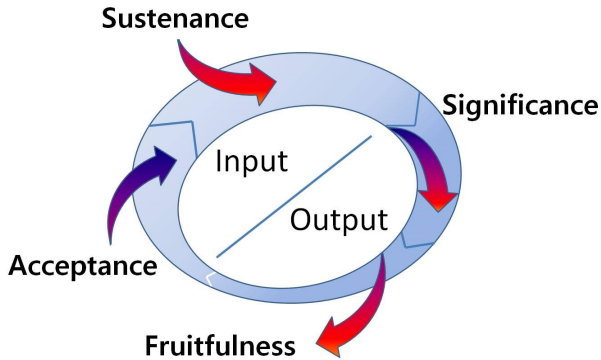
Prepare a genogram (a family tree) to cover three generations of your family. Annotate it with any repeating patterns - whether you consider them positive or negative.

When you come together, share what you have each prepared and tell the story of your family. (You might like to write this as a narrative before you meet). Identify the features of your family story that reveal God's grace and goodness, as well as patterns that bring sadness or hurt. Take it in turns to pray together over your family story (one story at a time), celebrating what is good and repenting, on behalf of your family for sinful or destructive patterns. Seek God's release and healing for your families - including your own hearts. Consider how negative patterns might be countered in the way you live your lives.

You might like to do some reading on this area. Peter Scazzero's book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, includes a chapter entitled, 'Going Back in Order to Go Forward - Breaking the Power of the Past', which you may find helpful. For a deeper exploration of how wounds can be healed in families, churches and communities, you could read Russ Parker's *Healing Wounded History*.

Spiritual Exercise 7

Use the Cycle of Grace model to reflect on your spiritual lives.



The Cycle of Grace was devised by Frank Lake and Emile Brunner to address the question of what sustains us in our life and service for Christ. It moves through four stages: acceptance, sustenance, significance and fruitfulness. These are well worth exploring together with your spiritual friend. There are some notes that you can download from the Small Group section of website entitled *The Cycle of Grace Retreat*, which explore the four stages and provide some questions and prompts to get you into conversation and prayer.

Here are some questions that relate to the cycle that you might use:

- Talk about your experience of being loved by God. Are there any blocks for you?
- What practices sustain you in your relationship with God? How might you strengthen these?
- Talk about your gifts and your sense of calling (your unique

way of being in the world/what make you feel alive).

- Who are you investing in and who is investing in you?
- What fruit is God cultivating in you and through you?

If you want to take this further, there is an excellent book by Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas, entitled *The Cycle of Grace: Living in Sacred Balance*, as well as some short videos by the same authors that can be easily accessed on *Youtube*. These have the following titles:

- Cycle of Grace 1: Acceptance
- Cycle of Grace 2: Sustenance
- Cycle of Grace 3: Significance
- Cycle of Grace 4: Fruitfulness
- Cycle of Grace 5: A Grace-filled way to live

These are no more than 15 minutes each and could be profitably used by small groups and/or by spiritual friends.

Spiritual Exercise 8

Practice *lectio divina* together. This is a way of reading a short passage of the Bible (usually a gospel story) that pays attention to the Holy Spirit. It is quite simple.

Decide on a passage - choose a story (not a long one) from one of the gospels

Take a few minutes to be still, committing the time to God.

Let one of you read the passage.

Silently reflect for a few minutes (don't analyse the story, just be aware of what has got your attention, open to what God might be saying).

Continued on next page...

Spiritual Exercise 8 (continued)

Let the other person read the passage.

Keep silence again, restfully waiting on God, open to his voice.

Repeat another reading and silence if you like.

Now share together what has been happening for you during the weave of reading and silence. This might include what parts of the story have stood out for you or affected you in some way. What connections are you making with the story. What is God saying to you?

Spiritual Exercise 9

Pick up on a recent sermon that has impacted one of you. That person could bring along the small group notes relating to it (download from the website) and/or their own written reflections to share.

Spiritual Exercise 10

Share together about your frontline (where you work - whether paid or voluntary). Get hold of the '6 Ms Summary Sheet' (download from our website) which gives an overview of six ways in which we can grow and bear fruit in our places of work/activity.

You might also like to get hold of the book by Mark Greene (London Institute of Contemporary Christianity): 'The One About', which contain eight stories of people working out their faith on their frontline. These are inspirational.

Spiritual Exercise 11

Find a daily office to try out (a simple liturgy to pray at different times of the day - e.g. morning and mid-day). Agree to both give it a go and report back. The Northumbrian Community provide such a resource, as does the Community of Aiden and Hilda. Talk to any of the ministers for further information and see websites on the back of this booklet.

Spiritual Exercise 12

Work together on a 'rule of life' - which is a set of spiritual practices that help you to grow in your spiritual life. This relates to the 'sustenance' stage of the Cycle of Grace. You might start by reading Peter Scazzero's chapter on this: 'Go the Next Step to Develop a "Rule of Life"' in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* and go from there.

Further Reading

Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community: A profound vision of what the church could be*

Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Ray Simpson, *Soul Friendship: Celtic Insights into Spiritual Mentoring*

Russ Parker, *Healing Wounded History*

Viv Thomas, *Wisdom Road: Making Decisions in the Company of God*

Practical Resources

There are many great resources that might be used within a spiritual friendship. Here are just a few examples.

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Day by Day - a 40-day journey with the Daily Office, by Peter Scazzero

The Cycle of Grace: Living in Sacred Balance, by Trevor Hudson and Jerry P. Haas (in book or kindle formats)

Walk this Way: 40 days on the road with Jesus, edited by Stephen Holmes and Russell Rook.

Is God for Real? Signposts and stories for people who wonder, by Chris Leonard

Dust & Glory: Daily Bible Readings from Ash Wednesday to Easter Day, by David Runcorn

The Cry of the Deer: Meditations on the hymn of St. Patrick, by David Adam

The One About... - 8 stories of everyday discipleship, by Mark Green (London Institute of Contemporary Christianity)

Websites:

www.northumbriacommunity.org

www.aidanandhilda.org.uk

infinitemlife.com



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