



Gather & Pray

Title: 8 Week Guide

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Introduction

Church teams begin the Whole Church Initiative (WCI) process with a “Gather & Pray” season, in which the team develops practices of prayer, teamwork, and spirit-centeredness. This is accomplished by the team establishing a rhythm of meeting together weekly for spiritual formation, discussion, and building covenant relationships.

The team meeting consists of all persons who will undergo the WCI training, including pastor(s), select staff, and lay leaders. The convener of this preparation season is a team member – preferably a lay person – who exhibits gifts in administration and leading groups and who is chosen through the team’s prayerful discernment. What follows is an outline of how a team could utilize this eight-week season of preparation.

Leadership Roles:

Convener

Although the convener may be capable of handling every task, the process is more fruitful if they equip others and share the responsibilities. The convener is responsible for managing the following items:

1. ***Keeping the group’s rhythm***

Send meeting reminders at least two days before the meeting and share follow-up notes within a couple of days after the meeting. This can be done over email.

2. ***Location set-up***

Make sure the gathering room is a comfortable atmosphere and free of distractions. Ideally, the group sits all together at one circular table.

3. ***Developing and timing the process for each meeting***

How the group spends time together is a flexible process, not an “agenda” or a list of to-do items. The convener of the meeting is the only one who needs to keep an eye on the process and timing. This allows the group to relax and move with the Holy Spirit, while the convener quietly adjusts as needed. This is a journey of discovery, not a race; an intentional process, not a forced assignment.

4. ***Spiritual Formation and Text Debriefing Leader assignments***

When Activities and Text Debriefings are well-prepared, everyone in the group can fully engage in the process. This task may include preparing materials or other support and assigning the rotating task of preparing to debrief the group on the week’s reading. See weekly outline below for more detailed information and scheduling.

5. ***Keeper of the Covenant (may be delegated)***

Week 1 includes discussion on creating a basic peer-to-peer covenant for the group members to abide by during the Gather & Pray season. A covenant is different from a contract in that members commit unconditionally: each member chooses to abide by agreed-upon behaviors, whether others do so or not. The process of creating a covenant helps group members express their needs in building high-trust relationship, and will provide a strong foundation for the group as they enter the next phase of WCI.

The convener, or another selected group member types up the covenant and keeps track of how the group plans to hold one another accountable. Any group member may approach the covenant keeper if they feel something needs to be adjusted or addressed. The covenant keeper decides how covenant issues need to be handled and serves as a mediator of any discussions around concerns. This covenant can be reviewed and adapted at any point of the WCI journey and beyond.

Text Debriefing Leaders

Each week, a different group member prepares to lead text discussions. The Text Debriefing Leader reviews the chapter, soul training exercise, and small group discussion guide within the appendix that corresponds with their assigned chapters. In addition, some weekly outlines below recommend additional or substitute activities.

The Text Debriefing Leader prepares for their tasks at least one week prior to the discussion. For example, someone planning to lead the debriefing for Chapters 5 and 6 during Week 4 reads the chapters and plans a basic debriefing outline by Week 3's meeting. This is so the leader can discuss what to expect when the reading is assigned during the Week 3 meeting, providing the group with plenty of time to complete any activities associated with the reading.

Please read the provided "Reading Texts for Spiritual Formation" document for assistance and tips on guiding a group reading a text.

Text Selection

The Good and Beautiful Community by James Bryan Smith examines characteristics of community growing together in Christ-likeness. Nine chapters, each including “soul training” exercises, lead the reader/group toward developing a “soul training plan,” or Rule of Life. This text will serve as a framework for the eight-week WCI preparation process.

Other Materials

1. Spiritual Formation Booklet
2. Reading Texts for Spiritual Formation

Schedule

Each week the group meets for a two-hour period in a location free from distractions and heavy hospitality responsibilities.

The group may wish to share a meal or snack/dessert before or after their time together, but only as long as it does not become a stress point or distraction for any person(s) within the group. The two-hour time period does not include a meal, so this would need to be scheduled outside of the meeting time. Keep breaks brief (five minutes).

Where not otherwise indicated, instructions for group process below are intended for the convener.

Week 1

Introductions

Invite each person to share the following (consider writing up on a whiteboard or printing out questions so participants can remember what to answer):

- Name
- What church(es) did you attend as a child? If you did not attend a church as a child, when and where did you start attending?
- What do you miss from your early church days? What do you NOT miss?
- From what you understand so far about this team, what are you most excited about? Most concerned/apprehensive about?

Establish a basic covenant

Discuss the expectations team members have or desire for themselves around attendance, technology, confidentiality, and other topics important to the group members. An example covenant has been provided.

Example of a Basic Covenant

Adapt to fit the desires of your group:

- We will each attend our weekly gatherings, beginning and ending on time. If someone has not arrived by the break time and has not notified someone in the group of their absence, they will receive a text or phone call during break time to make sure they are okay.
- Cell phones will be silenced during meetings, and we will not text or email except on break. If phone calls must be taken, the person will step outside of the meeting space.
- Confidentiality - A person may talk outside the group about what they themselves shared within the group, but will not talk about what others have shared, even to spouses.
- If a covenant issue arises with an individual or of the group as a whole, the keeper of the covenant will approach the topic in an appropriate and respectful manner. For example, a violation may warrant a mediated discussion between individuals or with the group as a whole.

Discuss what it means for pastors/staff/laity to be in covenant together

All are encouraged to set positions aside within the space of this group, and treat one another as brothers/sisters in Christ, first and foremost.

Break

Spiritual Formation: “Follow Me x 2”

Compare and reflect on implications of Matthew 4:18-22 and John 21:15-19 – see Spiritual Formation booklet for additional instructions.

Preparations for Week 2:

- Introduce concept of God Sightings (see Spiritual Formation booklet)
- Invite members to keep a notebook or journal to record their reflections from the meetings and readings.
- Week 2 Text Debriefing Leader: Introduce book and invite group to read the Introduction and Chapter 1 for next week. Explain to the group how this part of the text will be debriefed.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer (see Spiritual Formation booklet) and Holy Communion.

Week 2

Spiritual Formation

God Sightings (see Spiritual Formation booklet)

Review Basic Covenant

Invite group members to share how they feel about the basic covenant discussed the week prior. Make any desired changes so that all feel a healthy mix of comfort and challenge within the commitment.

Break

Debriefing of Introduction & Chapter 1 of Text (Text Debriefing Leader):

Follow the author's Small Group Discussion Guide.

Preparations for Week 3:

- Week 3 Text Debriefing Leader: Invite group to read Chapters 2 & 3 for next week. Notify the group of how this part of the text will be debriefed.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Week 3

Spiritual Formation

Lectio Divina (see Spiritual Formation booklet)

Debriefing of Chapters 2 & 3 of Text (Text Debriefing Leader):

Combine the author's Small Group Discussion Guides for both chapters by selecting discussion questions from each chapter guide.

Break

The convener may choose to place the break sometime during the text debriefing.

Preparations for Week 4:

- Week 4 Text Debriefing Leader: Invite the group to read Chapters 4 & 5 for next week. These chapters discuss unity and reconciling as part of community, which many group members may find challenging. Encourage the group to focus on the spirit of the chapters, not the particular issues that serve as the author's examples.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Week 4

Spiritual Formation

God Sightings

Debriefing of Chapters 4 & 5 of Text

The group may wish to end this discussion with Holy Communion.

Break

The convener may choose to place the break sometime during the text debriefing.

Preparations for Week 5:

- Week 5 Text Debriefing Leader: Invite the group to read Chapters 6 & 7 for next week.
- Convener: begin Prayer Partner selection process (see below).

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Prayer Partners – Selection Process

It is normal and healthy for the team as a whole to consist of several smaller, overlapping “inner circles” – in other words, each person will develop a special and unique bond with each member of the group. Celebrate this through a special prayer partner selection process, rather than randomly assigning pairs.

During the Week 4 session, allow each team member to prayerfully consider who from the group they would like to be their prayer partner. Have each person privately write down three names in no particular order (two names are sufficient for smaller groups). Encourage each person to consider the spiritual connection they feel with each person, rather than focusing on other aspects such as age or gender differences. Invite each person to write down the names of three people with whom they feel comfortable sharing openly, and who would also challenge them in this season of their faith journey.

The convener collects each person’s list. If there is an odd number of team members, the convener will not have a prayer partner, but will serve as a substitute when other team members are absent. This is not a disadvantaged situation for the convener, simply different. Talk with your convener trainer to discuss prayer partner options for the convener.

The convener reads each person’s requests, and prayerfully begins to create pairs. Make every attempt to pair each person with someone they requested.

Sometimes pair requests don’t work out perfectly, and sometimes one or two people are not requested by anyone else to be their prayer partner. In this situation, the convener can prayerfully contact someone they feel would be a good fit, and ask them to consider being that person’s prayer partner. This can be done discreetly and without much explanation – neither person needs to know why the convener is making a special request.

Announce Prayer Partners by email before the next meeting.

Week 5

Spiritual Formation

Lectio Divina (see booklet)

Prayer Partners

- Invite Prayer Partners to meet privately, ideally in separate rooms.
- Prayer Partners form their own specific covenant. Topics to discuss include how often they will pray for one another, and when and how they can contact each other for prayer or updates throughout the week.
- Each person shares a request for prayer with their Prayer Partner.

Break

Debriefing of Chapters 6 & 7 of Text

Conduct the debriefing process through Prayer Partners.

Preparations for Week 6:

- Week 6 Text Debriefing Leader: Invite the group to read Chapters 8 & 9 for next week. As a way to debrief Chapter 8, plan for individuals or the group as a whole to visit another place of worship sometime during the week. This is not meant to be an exercise in comparison; in the spirit of the chapter, other churches are not “the competition.” Seek to attend other places of worship as a way of encouraging other brothers and sisters in the faith. Do not let the pastor(s) or staff opt out of this one! The lay members of the group may need to make a special effort (perhaps helping with worship on the home front) to see that their pastor(s) and staff are able to attend another worship service during the week, or at a different time on Sunday morning.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Week 6

Spiritual Formation

God Sightings

Debriefing of Chapters 8 & 9

Focus discussion on debriefing the special worship experience(s), and forming a Rule of Life. See below for a “Debriefing Process” and “Rule of Life – Another Angle.”

Break

The convener may choose to place the break sometime during the text debriefing.

Preparation for Week 7:

- *Rule of Life:* Each individual in the group works on a draft of their Rule of Life.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer



Debriefing of Events or Experiences – Process

Debriefing events and experiences will be a regular part of the WCI process and beyond. Your group can begin to practice this at any time, but after experiencing a worship service elsewhere is the ideal opportunity!

The heart of a good debriefing is in asking the right questions. As a general practice, avoid asking questions that ask “why” – they tend to put others on the defensive (i.e. “Why did you do that?” or “Why do you think that way?”). The following are questions that may be helpful to ask after attending a new worship service, although they can be adapted to help debrief other experiences or events:

1. How did you feel before, during, and after the worship service? If feelings changed, what do you believe contributed to those different feelings?
2. What was familiar to you, and what was different? What was your initial response to the things that were different?
3. At any point did you have a “Holy Spirit moment?” When did you sense God’s presence? What was going on externally and within your mind and heart?
4. What may God have been trying to reveal through this experience?
5. In what ways have you been changed by this experience?

As with any effective group discussion, the discussion leader creates space for each person to share. Draw out the more quiet participants with an encouraging look or nod, or follow-up afterwards privately. Discussion leaders are reflective listeners – summarizing what they are hearing, affirming what is shared, and making connections between participants.

Rule of Life – Another Angle

Developing a Rule of Life is less about selecting from a buffet of common spiritual disciplines, and more about allowing God to reveal how God is drawing you to Godself. A Rule of Life is an invitation from God – an invitation to a deeper relationship, not a to-do list. What does a married couple do to draw closer to one another? What about a parent and child? There are at times specific things those in relationships will commit to, as they know those commitments provide the space to know one another better, such as sharing a meal at the table together, going on walks together, or intentionally checking in with one another.

For your Rule of Life, you may wish to think of the most satisfying human relationship you have or have had – it might be with your spouse, but it doesn't have to be. It could be with a parent or grandparent, a child, friend, or mentor. Don't let the "could's" or "should's" override here; allow God to reveal the relationship God has been developing for you in this process, and then don't spend the time worrying about or mourning over who did not surface.

What is it, or was it, that you and that other person commit or committed to in order to draw closer to one another? What elements of the relationship helped you know one another better? Was it conversation? Letters? Activities? Shared vision and response? Face time or touch? Allow those thoughts and memories to surface, and write them down. Then spend some time giving thanks to God for that relationship. Continuing in prayer, look over those commitments. Ask God to reveal parallels to those elements that would draw you closer to God in the next season. Allow those elements to perhaps shape your spiritual commitments within your Rule of Life.

Week 7

Spiritual Formation

Lectio Divina

Prayer Partners

Allow a significant amount of time for Prayer Partners to meet and discuss their Rule of Life drafts. Each pair discusses the following after sharing their Rule of Life draft with one another:

- Which aspects of my Rule of Life are already regular parts of my rhythm? How have these aspects drawn me closer to God in the past?
- What aspects are new to me? How will these help me grow closer to God in this next season?
- Which aspects will be especially difficult for me?
- How can my Prayer Partner best help me as I commit to this Rule of Life?

Break

Invite Prayer Partners to take a break as needed before returning for closing.

Preparations for Week 8:

- Each individual finalizes their Rule of Life and brings three copies to next week's meeting: one for the covenant service, one for their prayer partner, and one for themselves to keep.
- *Affirmation cards:* The convener hands out index cards to each member of the group – enough so that each person has one for every other person in the group. Invite each person to write down a few sentences of affirmation for each person in the group. This will be shared next week during the covenant service.
- Next week will involve a time of looking back and looking forward. Invite the group to reflect on what this time of preparation has meant to them, and what they look forward to as they journey with their team through WCI. Participants may wish to note their responses in their journals.

Closing

John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Week 8

Covenant Service

The Convener may wish to work with the pastor to frame this week's session as worship. No complicated liturgy is required, but a spirit of prayer and celebration can weave the movements below into a cohesive whole.

- ***Rule of Life Commitment:*** Offer a creative way to connect and display the Rule of Life papers. For instance, cut a colorful poster board into a large circle, and place double sided tape around the edges. As they commit their Rule of Life, allow group members to tape the top edge to the circle. When all Rule of Life papers have been taped, select a place to hang it – perhaps in the Pastor's office!
- ***Affirmations:*** Each team member shares their prepared affirmations. Affirmation cards are distributed to each team member to take home.
- ***Looking back/Looking forward:*** The convener invites the group to share openly about their experience over the last eight weeks, and their thoughts about moving into the WCI process as a team.
- ***Holy Communion:*** If your group has not done so already, celebrate Communion together. Serve one another by passing the elements in a circle. Receive by intinction.
- ***Closing:*** John Wesley Covenant Prayer

Celebrate!

Select a way to celebrate together – share a meal or dessert, exchange small gifts, do something fun (movie, bowling, hiking, play games)... simply enjoy one another!

What Now?

Your team will continue to meet on a weekly basis throughout the WCI process and beyond. James Bryan Smith on page 230 of *The Good and Beautiful Community* recommends a simple framework for future meetings. In addition, your group may wish to try the other activities available in the Spiritual Formation booklet.

Review (and perhaps revise) your group and prayer partner covenants as you prepare for the "Learn & Image" phase of WCI.