

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

Firstly, you will notice that at the start of each lesson there are three important bits of information. These will be the basic tools you need to lead the study.

All Scripture will appear in this BLUE colour. All Scripture references are taken from the NIV version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.

All discussion questions are in this GREEN colour. These discussion questions are meant to help open up times of sharing in your group.

Occasionally you will see text in RED. Red text are some ideas and thoughts that you may want to use for your group.

The bulk of the text will be in BLACK. This is the script and information for your lesson. However, please do not stick to the script word for word. The information is there just to serve as a guideline. Please feel free to lead or facilitate the discussion in the way which GOD is leading you.

Spiritual Friendships: Your Next Steps

**Pastor Andrew Gardener, Jess Evans
and Oliver Ip**

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Getting-to-Know-One-Another Questions:

- What is the most unique friendship that you have? For example, an intergenerational friendship, or a cross-cultural friendship. Share with the group.

Opening Discussion Question:

- What has God been putting on your heart throughout the spiritual friendship message series?

In this message Pastor Andre, Jess, and Oliver shared with us possible next steps for us to take for starting spiritual friendships or deepening already existing spiritual friendships.

Every person is at a different point on the spiritual friendship journey.

- Where are you on the journey in the development and deepening of spiritual friendships in your life?

- What are some barriers that you are facing in the development and deepening of spiritual friendships?

Ps Andrew acknowledged the tensions between our desire to have deep spiritual friendships and the reality of actually having them. There are many barriers that can keep us from having such friendships. He invited Jess and Oliver from The Vine's Pastoral Team up to discuss barriers that were shared with us anonymously at the interactive station in The Vine Centre 2/f lobby.

The Five Most Common Barriers:

1. Time and Priorities: “I don’t have time”

Oliver quoted a friend saying “we make time, not find time.” One way to overcome this time barrier is by deciding what is truly important to us and then scheduling our priorities in our calendar. This allows us to prioritise the things that truly matter to us in life.

2. Honour: “Different point of view of life direction”

It’s common to surround ourselves with people who are like us. However, in spiritual friendship God often brings

people into our lives who are different from us. “In spiritual friendship” Jess said, “we are aiming to push each other towards Christ-likeness, not me-likeness.” One way to address this barrier of difference is by honouring one another above ourselves.

What that can look like practically is “Seeing who God has created them to be, treating them the way Jesus would treat them. At times, it may mean calling out the things that God has called them to, or the characteristics that God has given them when they don’t see it; calling out the best in them, championing them towards that greatness. At times, it may mean, as Derek defined accountability -

calling to account their ability. It's hearing their hearts and getting in touch with what God is doing in their lives.”

[To **dig deeper**, please go to the **digging deeper** section below]

3. Transience & Goodbyes: “When will that person leave HK?”

Oliver had a couple of ideas for dealing with the barriers of transience and goodbyes. He suggested that when a spiritual friend leaves Hong Kong that we acknowledge our pain of the person leaving and allowing ourselves to grieve. At the same time, we can acknowledge that goodbyes don't mean the friendship ends. Oliver suggested, “Before, or even

after, someone leaves I advise speaking with them about what you hope your friendship will look like going forward. Be intentional - even creative - about finding the ways that you will continue to share your lives authentically, vulnerably, deeply and spiritually.”

4a. Hurt / Betrayal: “Someone hurt me before, I am so sad”

4b. Boundaries: “very few are open to say the truth”

Jess noted that “The three main barriers to entering community that you told us are in the areas of hurts, trust and fear.” The suggested way forward was to

develop healthy boundaries with different levels of intimacy.

5. Listening in order to Understand: “Will people still accept me?”

Oliver pointed out some essential truths about us as people:

- All people are different
- All people have problems
- All people desire to be understood

One of the greatest gifts we can give each other as people is the gift of understanding one another. According to Oliver, “To understand and be understood, we must learn to listen.

Good listening fundamentally aims to understand, to truly hear and see, how God is at work in this other person.” Furthermore, he noted, “We give attention and presence to a friend in order to know and understand them - not fix, critique, judge, or control them.” Ultimately we can overcome the barrier of worrying about being accepted by “Cultivating friendships where I am interested in understanding you and you feel safe to make yourself understood and the same goes the other way.”

- Which one of these five barriers to having a spiritual friendship do you relate to the most? Why?

- Was the advice shared for how to push past these barriers helpful to you? Why or why not?
- Do you feel ready to take the next step in this journey of starting or deepening spiritual friendships?

Ps Andrew went on to discuss in detail how to begin a spiritual friendship and suggested a structure for meeting with spiritual friends. You can find his detailed guidance on **Beginning a Spiritual Friendship** and for a **Suggested Structure for Meetings with Spiritual Friends**, at the end of the study.

Consider using some of Ps Andrew's suggested questions for your group discussion.

Digging Deeper:

One of the barriers that can stand in the way of spiritual friendships are our differences. Differences in personality, differences in calling, differences in socioeconomic backgrounds, differences in age, and differences in cultural background. The Bible makes it very clear that we are not just called to be in spiritual friendship with people like us. When we are adopted into the family of God we become brothers and sisters with people from all walks of life. **So how**

do we overcome the barrier of 'difference' when it comes to spiritual friendship? How can we enter into meaning spiritual friendships with those who don't share the same background with us?

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans addresses our question. The early Christian community in Rome was at odds with each other. There was tension between Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians and the Jewish Christians. In Romans chapters 1-11 Paul demonstrates that both Gentiles and Jews are equally sinners in need of God's saving grace and mercy. In

Romans chapter 12-15, among other things, Paul instructs on how to love and honour each other and live as a unified body of Christ.

Read **Romans 12:9-13**:

“⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practise hospitality.”

Paul provides instructions on what it means to love each other in a sincere (un-hypocritical) way.

- As you read through these verses what stands out to you and why?
- How might these instructions help people that are focused on their differences grow in love and appreciation for each other?
- What has been helpful in your experience to grow in love and appreciation of another person that is different from yourself?

- Do you believe that putting these instructions into practice could help you overcome the barrier of “difference” and enter into a deep meaningful spiritual friendship? Why or why not?

Loving someone in an un-hypocritical way is less about how we feel about that person than how we act towards that person. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright commenting on verse 9 of this passage puts it as follows, “ ‘Love’ is more about what people do than about how they feel.” Furthermore, he

highlights that “When we behave towards someone as though we really did love them, then, to our surprise, love, care and concern for the other person’s welfare quickly springs up.”

- Why might N.T. Wright’s insights be significant for breaking through barriers of ‘difference’ and moving towards spiritual friendship?

In her sharing, Jess quoted [Romans 12:10](#): “Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.” The second part of the verse can also be translated as “Outdo one another in showing honour.” In other words, “Don’t wait for the other person

to show honour, you start with honouring them.”

- What might it look like to honour people who have a different background from us?
- What might it look like to call out the beautiful/good things you see in another person? Can you share a personal experience?
- Take some time to honour each other in your community group – call out the beautiful and good things you see in each other.

Verses 11-12 provide some insight in how we can have the spiritual fervour to love others in a sincere way.

- What insights do verses 11-12 share on how to maintain the spiritual fervour to love others and to serve the Lord?
- What is the Holy Spirit prompting you to do?
- What next step are you planning to take on your spiritual friendship journey this week? Be specific!

Beginning a Spiritual Friendship and Suggested Structure for Meetings with Spiritual Friends

Beginning a Spiritual Friendship

First, start by getting to know a holistic spiritual picture of the friend you are engaging with:

1. **History:** Begin by sharing some of your spiritual history—your autobiography. What have been the high places and low places in your personal spiritual journey?

2. Share one specific memory of feeling close to God—one specific period you felt distance from God.
3. **Present:** Talk about the present. How do you feel about your relationship with God at the present time? What spiritual disciplines do you practise? What are the strengths and weaknesses in your personal use of spiritual disciplines? Where would you like to ‘go’ in this area? What can help you? What hinders you?
4. **Future:** Talk about the future. What are your goals for yourself in

spirituality? How are you going to move toward those goals?

Then, focus on specific Spiritual Disciplines:

1. **Talk about prayer.** What is the place of meaning of prayer in your life? Where is it easy and where is it hard? What kinds of prayer are you involved with? Where do you want to learn or grow in your prayer life?
2. **Talk about pictures of God.** What single words, images, or metaphors about God are most meaningful to

you? Which images or pictures do you find difficult or barriers for you? How does imagery affect your prayer life?

- 3. Talk about your relationships.** Do you have any key relationships that need healing or forgiveness? Are you bitter over past conflict? How is your communication with friends and family?
- 4. Talk about your community.** How does being in the church impact your life in God? What experience of meaningful community do you have? What are your needs and hopes in this area?

5. Talk about your faith. What hinders or hurts you in your desire to know and follow God? How do you handle suffering and hurt in your life? Who is God for you in such places?

I believe with this framework you can take a good friend of yours and begin to move into a spiritual friendship relationship with them as you spend the time to ask these questions and invest in each other's lives.

Suggested Structure for Meetings with Spiritual Friends

The next step comes once you have your spiritual friends, you know each other well and have gained a holistic spiritual picture of each of your lives, then how can you structure your time together when you meet so to get the best out of your time together and walk together closely.

Time:	One Hour
Place:	Somewhere quiet where you feel comfortable to pray with each other. Can be public, but make sure you have enough privacy to facilitate a good conversation.
Size:	2-4 people. 3 is ideal
Frequency:	Once a month minimal / Ideally Bi-Weekly
Content:	<p>‘ABC’ Model of Spiritual Friendships</p> <p>Active Listening:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When have you sensed God’s presence recently?” • “What is an example of how you have been experiencing God lately?”

- “How are things going in your relationship with Christ?”
- “Is there anything you need to confess or bring into the light today?”
- “What has the Lord been saying to you recently?”
- “What are you and God working on together these days?”

Brainstorm an Action or Focus
(not about giving advice or
telling people what to do!):

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “What do you think God is leading you to do about this situation?”• “What would you like to do to grow closer to God in this area?”• “What might Christ be teaching you about improving your relationship with Him?”• “What has God said to you from His Word about this issue?” |
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Close with Prayer

- “How can I pray for you?”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “How can I pray for your relationship with God in this area?”• “What would you like to ask God to do in your life?”
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