



Accountability

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A Tidy Dwelling

If it wasn't for guests, my floors would never see the light of day.

by Janine Petry

While I enjoy neat and clean living like anyone, I admit that it's not easy to maintain on a daily basis. I've often thought that if it wasn't for having guests over, my floors would never see daylight. They'd be covered in the big messes of two small children, constant come-and-go traffic dirt, and other items that just don't make it back to where they came from.

Thankfully, though, there are a few things that save me from utter chaos. A Sunday school class, a discipleship small group, and a ladies Bible study all meet in my home—on different days—each week. In order to accommodate passers-through, the house must receive some type of maintenance on a regular basis. While it can create pressure to *have to* be prepared for visitors, on the whole I find that it's better for me, my family, and everyone else when I'm held accountable to tidying. I've also learned that the stress of messiness outweighs the discomforts of cleaning.





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Similarly, if it wasn't for the "guests" who peer into my "eternal dwelling"—my heart—on a regular basis, it might never see light either. My heart and mind get cluttered like my carpet, but the consequences are more serious. With regular accountability from close friends and family, my spiritual dwelling—of more lasting importance than my physical one—receives the care and attention it desperately needs.

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10 says this: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" The question isn't *whether or not* we'll fall, but who will be there to help us *when we fall*. It's a fact: we need others to help us get up, to help us clean up, and to help us stay that way.

If you're looking to grow spiritually and experience more abundance in your life, then finding authentic accountability is your next step. Let this resource be a guide for you as you reach out for the genuine support and help you need in your life. Here, you'll find the practical advice and godly wisdom that you're looking for to get you started. You'll also find plenty of other resources packed inside for you to go even farther in finding accountability—and growing through all it has to offer.

Blessings,

Janine Petry
Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership
Christianity Today International

Introduction





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THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

Accountability That Makes Sense

Here's how to find the line between legitimate and illegitimate accountability.

by Paul Cedar

Let's face it: Leaders are accountable to others. Biblically we are to be accountable to God, to the Christian community, and, in some ways, to civic government and the community in which we minister. The Lord has created us with the need to be accountable to him and to others. When we aren't, we're not only being disobedient to God's Word, we're likely to get ourselves into trouble—even scandal.

While I'm convinced accountability is essential, I recognize that it can be difficult to structure. Sometimes it turns into an excuse for others to complain or to try to control leaders. When that happens, accountability does more harm than good.

Over the years, I've experienced some of that unhealthy accountability. But most of the time, accountability has been a positive experience, helping me be the leader and person God desires me to be.

Signs of Illegitimate Accountability

Here are four questions I ask that help me determine the legitimacy of the accountability offered me.

- **Are people holding me accountable for their personal expectations?** Because my predecessor arrived at the office at 7:30

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each morning, I hear criticism for coming at 8:30. Because the famous television evangelist preaches loudly, while I use measured tones, critics challenge my zeal. Because I visited one member in the hospital every other day instead of daily, word spreads that I don't care about people.

Catering to such expectations takes a tremendous toll, if it doesn't kill us. We cannot meet each person's individual agenda. So, when I sense that someone expects me, in the name of accountability, to meet merely his or her personal expectations, I graciously decline. In this regard, I found it helpful to have a written position description, the summary of which I communicated regularly to those I serve. That keeps to a minimum this form of illegitimate accountability.

- **Are people trying to control me?** I once sat in a meeting with some of the past leaders of our church, a group of about six or seven executives, strong personalities, who were upset over how I had handled a recent decision-making process in the church. Having gotten word indirectly of their feelings, I had suggested we meet.

After we gathered, they asked, "Why didn't you come to us for counsel instead of sharing your decision with the whole congregation?"

"Well, guys, not one of you are in office at the present time," I began. "You're not a part of the structure. You're personal friends, and our discussion is certainly appropriate at that level. But you can't set up an ad hoc committee. I'm accountable clearly through our church's structure, and I'm sorry none of you are in that structure right now. If you have concerns, come to me, or come to the people who are in the structure."

- **Are people nit-picking?** Sometimes, when pressure builds, people exaggerate our mistakes and weak points. I may have preached a dozen life-changing sermons but botched the planning of one fellowship event. A leader may have been gracious in five thousand situations but testy in one late-night phone call. But it's the mistake that people tend to focus on. It may be that people dislike what we're doing, so they latch on to the one mistake to justify strong opposition.

- **Do people have a critical spirit?** Some time ago, I met with a

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church board unhappy with their pastor, a gifted young man. After discussing the reasons for their discontent, I finally asked, “What are you doing to help him mature in the areas where he lacks? How are you ministering to him? Is he aware of these problems? Have you talked to him about them?”

These questions completely surprised them. They had never considered they had a responsibility to build up that young man. In short, fruitful accountability—versus mere criticism—is constructive rather than destructive, edifying rather than selfish. There must be a motivation to advance the kingdom of God and to build the life of the person who’s being held accountable.

Spheres of Accountability

All these types of illegitimate accountability have one thing in common: people assume that your ministry or work revolves around their concerns. That is an oppressive assumption to live under. So in order to prevent one sphere of my ministry, or one person’s perspective, from dominating the whole, I find it helpful to remember that I’m accountable in a number of areas.

Sometimes, for instance, the demands of the organization seem justified, until I consider my responsibilities to be a good father and husband. So knowing my spheres of accountability—for me there are six—helps me determine where and when I should be legitimately guided by others.

- **To God.** To the Lord we owe ultimate allegiance. We faithfully answer to others only because we are trying to please him. Even though others may sometimes be dissatisfied with us, which is inevitable, if we aim to please the Lord, we are on the right track in terms of accountability.

Basically, being accountable to God means obedience and faith. The people who have embodied faith, whether Abraham or the entire roll call of Hebrews 11, simply obeyed when God commanded. That simple act of obedience is the essence of biblical faith and biblical accountability.

- **To the members of the body.** I am accountable to the church for a number of things: leadership, the care of individuals, administration,





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modeling the Christian life, to name a few. But above all, as a pastor, I feel I have a responsibility to feed God's flock and nurture his people. That means I have to give myself to serious study, in preparation for teaching and preaching.

That's not easy for me. I'm a people person. I'd much rather spend time being with my people, giving formal and informal pastoral care. But my people need something more from me. Consequently, I have recruited others to check on me periodically. Recently, when I saw Ted Engstrom, the first thing he asked was "How's your study time?" Knowing he and others will be kind enough to ask that simple question helps me stay in the study when I should.

- **To local church leaders.** They need my leadership, my vision, and my direction, I'm the point man in defining our philosophy of ministry, mission statement, and goals, both short term and long. I choose to be accountable to our leaders, also, in the conduct of my personal and professional life. Specifically, this includes living up to the elder's qualifications in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as well as the specific areas outlined in my position description.

- **To my family.** Accountability with my family begins with my taking a weekly Sabbath. For many years I did not take a regular day off, nor did my wife Jeannie. But the time came when we felt we should begin doing so, first because the Lord commands his people to take a regular Sabbath, and second because we felt our ministry, our family, and the church would be enhanced and enriched. Having Jeannie work with me on it has made me more consistent about taking a weekly Sabbath.

I've also found it helpful to ask my family to hold me accountable for my ministry.

For instance, before I married Jeannie, I knew I was called to a ministry of evangelism. She understood that we might have to live an itinerant life. Still, I told her, "Jeannie, as I commit my life to God and to you, I want to promise you something. Whenever I sense the Lord calling me to a ministry, I'll never make the decision alone. I'll be accountable to God and to you. If I sense God saying yes but you sense him saying no, we won't move. We will not budge without unity of heart."

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Including my family like this has prevented me from feeling alone during crucial decisions. Instead, the support and feedback I receive from them encourages me and helps me discern God's leading.

- **To the community.** When we were starting a building program at one church I served, we saw we were beginning with a handicap: several area churches were feuding with the city. It was front page news. It spooked several of our building committee people, who were leery about getting permits from local government agencies.

So I took a couple of key people from the church, and we met with the mayor, then the city manager, then with people from the building permit office, telling each of them: "We are privileged to be a part of our city. We want you to know we do not expect any special favors. We will follow the rules and guidelines you've established. We know that you want to protect the integrity and beauty of the city. Please know that we will do whatever we have to do to cooperate with you."

Afterward those city leaders were responsive, excited, and appreciative. In fact, the mayor and city council people would compliment us in public meetings, thanking the church for the way we worked with the city. Because of the command to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, leaders of local churches need to be accountable to the local authorities, at least as long as it doesn't compromise the integrity of the Gospel.

How to Foster Legitimate Accountability

In order to foster legitimate accountability, we need to do more than maintain a broad perspective on our responsibilities. We also need to take positive action to encourage helpful and healthy accountability. Here are four ways I've done that.

- 1. Welcome it.** Although it's difficult for me, I try not to be defensive when someone offers me a suggestion. I try to maintain an open ear for feedback and a willingness to honestly evaluate the suggested counsel. If I get tense, everybody gets tense, and that makes accountability all the more difficult.

It's not easy to simply welcome guidance from others. Some people who've known me for years say I'm hypersensitive. Part of that is by choice. A leader's heart must be acutely sensitive both to hear the Holy

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Spirit and empathize with people. If I were to protect myself with defense mechanisms, I'd become hard and calloused—that's too steep a price to pay. I think criticism stung Jesus, and so I think it's natural that we wince at pain. As I've matured, though, I'm learning not to overreact.

2. Model it. Holding others accountable requires a willingness to confront others with some difficult truths, and with love. This approach usually resolves the problem while building up the person who's involved. At the same time, it models to others how they can hold us accountable as leaders. It's a form of the golden rule, of treating others as we would want them to treat us.

3. When confronting, use the opportunity to plainly teach about accountability. I try to talk about what I am doing and why—what principles are guiding my confrontation. I think that was one of the geniuses of Christ's teaching style: he used conflict and misunderstandings as a well lit stage for instruction.

When I confront, I try to say, "The reason I'm going through the discomfort of bringing this to your attention is that I want your best. We all have blind spots, things that hurt us, and if no one loves us enough to tell us about them kindly, we suffer unnecessarily all of our lives. I'm not saying this because I'm angry at you or against you but because I'm for you."

4. Never question people's motives. Accusations are like chemical weapons: they poison the atmosphere. Early in my ministry God taught me a lesson when I was hurt by something a brother in Christ had said and done. Since I had assumed it was his motive to hurt me, I felt a great deal of pain and anger. Nonetheless, I felt encouraged by the Spirit to go to him to ask why he had done and said such things. Much to my surprise, he said what had happened was unintentional and that his motive had not been malicious.

God used that occasion to help me make an important commitment early in my ministry, that is, that I would never question another person's motives. So now, when I wonder what's driving others, instead of jumping to conclusions, I try to go to them. In lieu of accusing, I say something such as, "I may be wrong, but it looks to





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me that so-and-so happened. Tell me how you're feeling about it." In addition to the sense of freedom such a conversation can bring us, it also provides a model of how people should respond to us when they feel hurt or confused by something we've said or done.

I believe that accountability is absolutely essential for all Christians, especially Christian leaders. To obey Christ and follow him as Lord is the heart of true Christian accountability, but being accountable to others at various levels remains vital. When we belong to Christ, we belong to each other. And no member of the body can go it alone.

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Thought Provokers

- *Using the author's examples, how are you being offered "illegitimate" forms of accountability? How could being able to identify unhealthy forms of accountability positively affect your role as a leader?*
- *What are your spheres of accountability as a leader? How does knowing these help you in receiving guidance from others?*
- *Which of the author's four methods for fostering "legitimate" accountability is most helpful to you and why?*





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A CORPORATE PERSPECTIVE

Everybody Answers to Somebody

Why leaders must keep their staffs accountable.

by Steve Marr

Jeff Hughes* had been the senior pastor of a church of 250 members for five years. Most of his congregation gave him high marks for pastoral care and preaching.

However, two other staff members were not performing as well. Annette Singley*, the office secretary, was consistently late to work, took many days off, and was disorganized. As a result, important work often went undone. And Hughes had gained a reputation for failing to return calls—because Singley forgot to give him the messages.

Ed Wells*, the associate pastor, also struggled with time management and personal organization. He seemed unable to get to all his visitation calls, he forgot to follow through on assignments, and he, too, was often late. Some church members declined to serve on committees headed by Wells. Privately, they shared their discouragement over his poor leadership.

Unfortunately, Hughes never held his staff members accountable, despite the fact they were failing in their jobs, because he feared confrontation. After all, Singley had been a fixture in the office for 22 years, and Wells was everyone's friend. Actually, both of them spent more time befriending everyone than following through on ministry assignments.

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So, the problems lingered year after year. Hughes got frustrated but ended up covering the extra work himself. This strategy ultimately worked against him because by completing work for others he gave up time with his family, time for sermon preparation, and time for other church work and ministry. The church wasn't growing to its potential; in fact, it wasn't growing at all.

Face the Issues Head On

How should Hughes have responded? He should have held the staff accountable.

Accountability is the obligation to give a reckoning or explanation for one's actions and responsibilities. In the case of Hughes and his staff, it should have meant clearly defining responsibilities and then consistently checking with each staff member to ensure that he or she was accomplishing the tasks adequately.

The responsibility for keeping staff accountable falls to the leadership or senior staff members. But leaders often fail to confront poor performance because of fear of conflict or possible reaction in the organization. The notion that leaders must be nice to every employee often masks a personal unwillingness to tackle important performance issues. Avoiding conflict in these situations helps no one reach their God-ordained potential.

Glen Barth, a former administrative pastor at the 3,600-member Congregational Church in Edina, Minnesota, says, "In ministry, there is tension between accountability and freedom. Accountability must be built around the mission and goals of the church."

Two important areas of accountability that Barth mentions are 1) dealing directly with staff members in conflict with you, and 2) supporting other staff members publicly.

When Barth was pastoring in Minnesota the 12 pastors and 24 other staff members met to establish a church plan. Then each staff member established an individual plan in support of the master plan. The senior pastor agreed to each plan and each staff member was held accountable to the terms of the plan. When goals were not being met, a meeting was held with the senior pastor. These meetings might be scheduled as often as once a week to cover specific actions needed for success.





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Barth says a worker's performance was likely to change for the better if he had a teachable heart. "Most pastors responded well [to intervention]. They improved and became effective church pastors. When they failed to respond, [it was usually because] they did not have a teachable heart," he says.

Joseph Wheeler, commander of the Salvation Army's central territory for evangelism and core growth, also recommends that church leaders build accountability into the work environment, especially during a person's first five years on the job. At the Salvation Army the first five years of an officer's tenure are probationary, allowing for greater freedom to hold him or her accountable in matters of morality, spirituality, and follow through. The Salvation Army has a 23-point evaluation system covering every aspect of ministry. If one of the 23 areas is lacking, a plan is established to correct and improve performance.

The Formal/Informal Plan

Stan Reeder, senior pastor of Warren Woods Church of the Nazarene, an 800-member congregation with 10 staff members in Warren, Michigan, believes in establishing two levels of accountability: formal and informal.

Formal accountability involves developing five major, quantifiable goals that are agreed upon by the senior pastor and the staff member. After these goals are established Reeder makes sure an action plan is developed and benchmarks are set, all of which are transferred onto a daily calendar to prompt follow through. Goals should be aggressive enough to encourage the staff member to stretch, and a 75 percent completion rate could be considered satisfactory. Unless red flags arise, a formal progress evaluation is completed yearly.

Informal accountability means paying attention to how a staff member is pursuing his or her goals. In Reeder's church, for example, they had a youth pastor at one time who was struggling with personal organization. His inability to keep certain commitments led to the cancellation of several youth events, resulting in confusion and a loss of morale within the group. When the problem came to the senior pastor's attention, he met with the youth pastor, discussed the issues, and they agreed that no scheduled youth activities would be canceled during the next six months.





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When another event was subsequently canceled, another meeting was held between the two pastors. Then a third event was canceled and the senior pastor set up a meeting to terminate the youth pastor's employment. The youth pastor opened the meeting by resigning. Not every situation will work out this way, but pastors must be diligent in overseeing their staff and take appropriate action when problems arise.

Accountability in Action

Step 1: If you haven't established an accountability plan with your staff, then sit down with each one and outline in writing the standards and results that you and your organization expect. Be flexible but do not retreat from the minimum standards. When you have reached agreement, confirm your understanding in writing and outline the importance of each task as it relates to meeting the needs of the organization. Remember, the issue is not what you want but what the ministry or organization needs to fulfill God's mission.

Considering the example at the beginning of this article, associate pastor Wells might agree to make a minimum of four visitation calls per month and commit to being on time for each meeting (achievable and measurable results). Annette might be instructed not to exceed her allotted sick time and vacation days, and a standard should be established to ensure that her work is completed on time. Perhaps a time-management course would be a wise investment for the entire staff.

Step 2: Follow through is critical. Meet at the beginning of each week and evaluate how each person is doing. Praise positive results and correct poor performance. Do not gloss over deficiencies. Usually, performance improves with clear direction and enforced accountability.

Step 3: If a problem persists, sit down with the staff person again. Outline the previous agreement and ask the person to explain any hindrances to accomplishing the required assignments. Provide coaching and suggestions but reinforce personal responsibility.

Step 4: When performance improves, celebrate successes! If failure persists, try to discern the reason. Are the person's gifts and talents not a good fit with the job? Could their strengths be used elsewhere? Sometimes when staff members are laboring to stay focused it is because their primary duties do not match their gifts or calling.





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For example, a certain pastor was cited as a failure because he had obtained only one new family for his church in a year. However, during that same period, more than 20 teenagers had become Christians under his leadership. Fortunately, both he and the church realized that he was not called to be a senior pastor but was instead a dynamite youth pastor. An orderly transition was arranged and the pastor accepted a position as a youth pastor in another church. His ministry subsequently blossomed. Had the original situation never been confronted, however, his first church would have continued to struggle, and the other congregation would have been denied the youth pastor that God had called.

Of course, not every struggle results from playing out of position. Although some workers are misplaced, others simply are not working up to their capabilities. What's needed are steps toward diligence. True diligence combines time and action with an effective focus on the important aspects of the job. Paul gives us a great example of this principle in 1 Corinthians 9:26 when he says, "I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air" (NASB).

Step 5: After you've determined the reasons behind poor performance provide a helping hand of encouragement to move forward into a new opportunity at the organization or elsewhere. Taking a positive, proactive approach can protect long-term relationships. Failure to act will result in poor performance, increasing frustration, and will increase the likelihood of a confrontation in the future.

Keeping your staff accountable is a leader's privilege. If done well, the result will be personal growth for you and your staff—and, ultimately, growth for God's kingdom.

**Names changed.*

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Thought Provokers

- *The author defines accountability as “the obligation to give a reckoning or explanation for one’s actions and responsibilities.” As a leader, to whom are you accountable and who is accountable to you? How are you checking on one another?*
- *If you are noticing a failure to maintain proper accountability, to what could this be due? What are the potential risks involved in failing to maintain accountability?*
- *Think of a person you are leading now who is performing well. Based on the suggestions in this article, how can you approach this person and hold him or her accountable?*
- *Which of these steps do you find the easiest to put in place? Which seems the most difficult?*

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How to Start an Accountability Group

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How To

How to Start an Accountability Group

Here's how to become accountable and grow in your Christian life.

by Christopher Easley

An accountability group exists to help people of God stay pure and faithful in their walk with him and help them overcome sins. It provides a context to live out James 5:16, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

There are many benefits and blessings that come with an accountability group. Here are four (I'm sure there are more):

1. It helps each member submit every part of life to God's will, because it keeps each member accountable to acting in a holy way. As each member continually submits her life to God, God grows her character and she matures in her walk with Christ.
2. It acts as a safeguard against adulterous relationships and lustful habits, by bringing into the open each member's behavior. If she starts going down a dangerous path, the others can call her to

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purity. Richard Exley, former pastor and Christian author, says, “Temptation flourishes in the dark, but it withers and dies when it is brought into the light of accountability” (*Man of Valor*).

3. Group meetings provide a regular time of encouragement and prayer for each member.
4. It builds strong friendships between sisters in Christ. As women of God become vulnerable with one another and encourage each other, their friendships deepen.

As shown by these four benefits, an accountability group can be a great help in the lives of its members as they walk with Christ. Pray about starting an accountability group, so that you and others may benefit. Even if you don’t consider yourself a great leader, inviting some others to start an accountability group with you shouldn’t prove to be too difficult.

Choosing Whom to Invite

It is best to form the group by sexes. Coed groups have difficulty providing accountability to sexual purity. Pray about whom to invite. Consider these criteria:

- Each person you invite should seek to follow Christ in everything, care about their character, be able to keep a secret, care about others, and not belittle others when they fail.
- No one who gossips about others should be invited. “A gossip betrays a confidence, so avoid a man who talks too much” (Proverbs 20:19). Vulnerable information will be shared at group meetings, and you want the group to be a safe place to share. The effectiveness of the accountability group only goes as far as how vulnerable the members are willing to make themselves, which will be determined by their trust in the group as a whole.
- You need to know those you invite well enough to know that they fit the above criteria.

If you calculate five minutes for each member to share and be prayed for, a one-hour meeting can work for a 12-member group. However, the larger





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the size of your group, the harder it is for the members to build friendships with each other.

This causes problems for the group, as the effectiveness of the group is built on trusting the other members. If someone in an eight-member group knows five of the members well but doesn't know the other two, she probably won't be as open or vulnerable during meetings as she would be if she knew everyone in the group. So use discretion concerning how many people to invite. If you have 11 people you want to invite, consider asking one of them if she would like to start a group herself, making two six-member groups.

Instructions on the Invitation

Once you have your final list of people to invite, write an invitation. Some helpful guidelines are:

1. Include a short explanation of the purpose of this accountability group.
2. Make clear that this requires a commitment to come to regular meetings and to invest in the lives of the other members.
3. Ask the recipient of the invitation to pray about whether God wants her to join the group.
4. Ask the recipient to respond by a given date, usually about four weeks after you send out the invitations.
5. It may be helpful to include a page upon which they can write questions about the group.
6. Don't include the details about when and where the first meeting will be. You want your first meeting to be a strong start to a group of committed members. Some of those that you invite might not commit to joining the group. Only those who commit to being members of the group should be invited to the first meeting.
7. Don't mention the names of the others whom you are inviting. The recipient's decision to join should be a decision between





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her and God, not dependent on who else might be in the group. Also, if someone decides not to join the group, her decision should be respected and remain confidential. The others who are invited don't need to know about it.

Preparing

Once you have everyone's final response, you can officially start the group. Even if only one person out of those you invited is interested in starting a group with you, start the group.

Set a time and place for your meetings with the other members. The place needs to be private, somewhere where everyone in the group feels safe from intrusion. The length of your meetings will depend on what fits in everyone's schedules and on the size of your group. I recommend you take the number of people in your group and multiply by five to get the number of minutes for an ideal meeting. Using this method, an ideal meeting for six people is 30 minutes. (This is only true if everyone is always on time, and it doesn't allow for extra chatting after the meeting. You might want to multiply by seven instead to allow for conversation.) I strongly recommend having weekly meetings. It will be difficult to maintain effective accountability if you meet less frequently. Once you have these logistics figured out, you need to prepare for the first meeting.

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There are two crucial parts to an effective accountability group meeting. The first is a time in which each member shares how she has sinned and the temptations she has faced since the last meeting, and how she fared concerning the temptations she mentioned at the previous meeting. You can facilitate this sharing in several ways. One is for the leader of the week to ask the following four questions of each member at every meeting:

1. What sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations did you face?
3. How were you delivered from those temptations?
4. Are you unsure if any of your actions, thoughts, or words since our last meeting were sinful or not? If so, which ones?





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You could also just ask questions 1 and 2. Another way is to go over at the first meeting what each member will share each week and skip actually asking them the questions each week.

Someone may confess a sin of which they appear to be ashamed. If you observe this to be the case, ask her if she has been able to receive the Lord's forgiveness for her sin. If she says she still doesn't feel forgiven, lay a hand on her (ask permission first) and say, "You are forgiven in the name of Christ." It is important to affirm that we have been forgiven for our sins when we repent of them. You may be tempted to respond, "That's okay" but this is neither true nor helpful. "You have been forgiven through Christ" is the truthful response to a confession of sin.

Remember to ask them about how they fared concerning the sins and temptations that they mentioned at the last meeting. I have found it useful to actually take notes on what the various members share at each meeting so that we can remember during the prayer time and at the next meeting.

After everyone shares, the leader of the week can ask if anyone would like to be kept accountable throughout the week in some way beyond the group meetings. (For example, someone may want to be asked questions during the week about how she is doing concerning what she shared at the meeting.) This is the time to determine how each member can get the accountability she wants and needs.

The second essential part is group prayer for each member concerning what she has shared.

Format

Start with a short opening prayer. This helps focus everyone on God and acts as a clear sign that the meeting has officially started. In my group, I find it helpful to have the leader of the week prepare a get-to-know-you-better question, which starts a discussion about low-key issues before entering into sharing our sins and temptations. This is helpful because it is hard to start a meeting right off with sharing deep, personal problems and difficulties, even if everyone knows that's what the meeting is for. When we close our meeting, we have each person pray for the person on her left or right, and go around the circle praying.





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Feel free to experiment with formats. The goal is to have a format that provides a comfortable context for the sharing of sins or temptations and for group prayer. Try one format for a couple of meetings, and if it doesn't accomplish the goal, change it. You want to find a format that works and stick with it; that way everyone can become familiar with it and be the leader of the week if you ask them to be.

Leadership of the Accountability Group

Leaders have the responsibility of making the final call on decisions, but a good leader will get feedback from all the members affected by the decision before making it. Many decisions can be made as a group. It's your call whether to put decisions up to a vote or not.

Leadership of individual meetings can rotate from person to person. Once you've settled on a familiar format for meetings, ask the other members if they would like to lead the meetings once in a while. The "Leader of the Week" would be responsible for preparing any discussion questions or devotional thought for the meeting. Anything that you would do as the leader at one of the meetings, the leader of the week should do on their week.

Characteristics of a Healthy Accountability Group

Consider using this as a guide for your mission and purpose. You may want to have a copy of these characteristics handy to present to your group at the first meeting.

- **Vulnerability.** Each member is honest about how she has failed.
- **Accepting of God's Love and Forgiveness.** Each member accepts God's forgiveness for her sin, trusting him and rejecting feelings of guilt and shame. .
- **Validation and Support.** Regardless of what temptations a member struggles with or how she has sinned, she should be accepted by the group and loved, not judged or ridiculed.
- **Trust and Safety.** What is shared in the group stays in the group.
- **Prayer.** The members of the group together ask God to help them with their specific struggles, strengthen them as they face temptation, forgive them when they fail, and help them stand up again to walk with him and live as "more than conquerors through him" (Romans 8:37).

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- **Accountability.** If a member is struggling with a certain sin or temptation and shares this with the group, the group will hold her accountable to act in a godly way in that area.
- **Ownership.** Each member that participates in the group is consciously engaged in the group's meetings.
- **Fellowship and Friendship.** All of the members build healthy friendships with each other as sisters in Christ.

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective ... My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:16, 19). May God richly bless you as you and those in your accountability group keep each other walking in the truth.

*Christopher Easley is contributing writer for BuildingSmallGroups.com. This article first appeared on **BuildingSmallGroups.com**, 2006.*

Thought Provokers

- *The author mentions several “benefits and blessings” that come with an accountability group. Which of these do you feel are missing in your life, or in the lives of those you serve?*
- *The author encourages, “Pray about starting an accountability group, so that you and others may benefit.” Which of the steps in starting an accountability group would be the most difficult for you and why? How can you overcome these obstacles in order to gain the benefits?*





PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Soul Sisters

4 ways to foster spiritual friendships.

by Sally Miller and Cheri Mueller

I love carrot cake and hate small talk. Cheri craves ice cream and works out religiously. Friends for more than 20 years, we're two Starbucks-drinking, Levi-wearing, munchkin-rearing friends. But when Cheri and I mention we're on a "spiritual journey" together, people often give us blank stares. We suspect they're imagining us at Bible studies and weekend retreats. Some of those images ring true, but faith-filled friendship is more about sharing the rough-and-tumble of ordinary life than practicing spiritual piety.

Jesus and his 12 stinky fisherman friends spent more time at the beach than at a synagogue. Their hillside picnics probably felt more like church than most days at the temple. Every social gathering was a feast of friendship and faith. Even today, a circle of friends—with Christ at the center—is one of God's desires for his church. He continually sows seeds of community, whether we're scheduling play dates or coffee breaks, joining book clubs or Bible studies. Yet too often we rely more on our frenetic pace than on faith-inspiring friendships to serve our souls.

In their book *Friends for the Journey*, Madeleine L'Engle and Luci Shaw describe friendship as a gift "given to you—holy, happy, tough, tender, wild, wacky, a sacrifice, and a sacrament." Finding soul sisters





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means becoming more intentional about spiritual friendship. Cheri and I have discovered these important ways to foster it.

1. Cheri: Open your heart and mind. Start by asking God to put people in your life who will inspire your faith and nourish your soul. And be persistent about putting yourself in the presence of people you want to learn from—even if they're different from you.

When Sally and I first met as roommates at college, we were obvious opposites. Sally had jet-black hair and an operatic voice; I'm more introverted by nature. Though we shared little in common, we sensed there were things we could teach each other. So together we attended campus concerts and took train trips into the nearby city. Over that year—and the years that followed—God surprised us with the gift of being more than just sisters in Christ, but friends for the journey. It still surprises us how my introversion teaches Sally to live in the moment and wait on grace, and how her boisterous spirit nurtures my adventurous side. Together we're able to experience the full spectrum of a faith-filled life: stillness and movement, prayer and play.

When you're open to the Spirit's work in your life, friendship can spark anywhere, anytime: at the grocery store, in a book club, or in a church small group.

2. Sally: Honor and celebrate each other. When my husband and I returned from China with our adopted daughter, Emily Grace, Cheri loaded her clan into a minivan to make the snow-laden trek to Illinois for a welcoming celebration.

On antique hunts, my friend Rona and I hunt for pairs of brass candlesticks. I take one, Rona the other. The missing half reminds us we're not alone. When Cheri invites a girlfriend over, she lights a candle to remind her that friends reflect the glow of God's presence.

Friends can celebrate spiritual realities in ordinary moments. Whether it's with a fiesta for 50 or a casual luncheon for 2, time with your friends is sacred. Matthew 18:20 says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." God invites you to share in a feast of friendship and faith even in the mundane. Marking moments as holy and meaningful opens your heart to God and each other.

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3. Cheri: Share personal stories. Learning to love and nourish other women, spiritually speaking, is also about finding the courage to exchange personal stories. Hearts engage when you invite others to share their joys, struggles, questions, and dreams.

Sally and I were friends for 15 years when my move 400 miles away threatened to challenge the closeness of our friendship. Crippled with grief, I struggled with reaching out to new people. Sally and I began spending a lot of time together on the phone, unveiling parts of our hearts we'd guarded carefully before. Now, though geographically separated, we became closer than ever before.

Trusting that authenticity is a God-given seed for spiritual friendship, I also joined a women's Bible study group. Every Friday morning I dragged myself to church only to cry, struggle to engage, worry what others thought of me, and promise that next week I'd actually finish the homework. But over time, God handpicked a circle of friends for me who wear the fragrance of Christ.

Thankfully, friends don't have to be in crisis to take risks with each other. When you understand the power of sharing personal stories, you realize even a daily walk to the bus stop with your neighbor can open up opportunities for deeper sharing. The other day, as we awaited my son's big yellow bus, my neighbor shared that she's recently qualified for the Boston Marathon. Her story inspired me to share some writing accolades I may otherwise have kept hidden. Since then, we've been able to celebrate each other's successes and support each other during difficult times.

With frequent open sharing, you can confess over coffee with a childhood friend that tangled knot in your chest over a recent argument with your spouse. Or as you work through a study guide with a support group, you can leave an answer blank and instead ask a question burning in your soul. Authenticity leads to intimacy. And it's through intimacy you experience God's embrace.

4. Sally: Pray for each other. Intercession, the heart of prayer, means *favorable entreaty*. Anytime you give a gift to a friend, you express a favorable desire for her. Anytime you write an encouraging note or e-mail, you express your desire for your friend's well-being. And God's always listening.

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Recently a dear friend, Lucy, lost her infant daughter to a rare immune deficiency disease. She and her husband kept an online journal, and I reviewed the posting daily, weeping tears of compassion when IVs wouldn't stay in, tests came back with scary results, or another holiday went by in the hospital, away from the comforts of home. Some days I felt I hadn't prayed enough or in the right ways for Lucy. But when I read Lucy's last journal entry about her baby's death and soaked my blouse with tears, I realized sobbing was my prayer. Later that day, I wrote a poem for my friend, which I framed and sent to her as a memorial.

When we walk in compassion and grace with our girlfriends, we're experiencing spiritual friendship. It's nothing we have to "add in" or "put on." It comes with the territory of loving deeply. And it turns things as simple as tears into prayers. In this way, the apostle Paul's admonition to pray without ceasing is transformed into the everyday details of our relational realities.

Friendships are the heart and soul of God's church. He invites us to join hands in an ever-growing circle of love and grace, enjoying the mysterious way he weds our humble humanity with his holiness.

Sally and I are simply two friends on a spiritual journey together. As you too live with compassion, helping others while daring to reveal your heart in the process, you'll do what women do best: faith-filled friendship.

Sally Miller and Cheri Mueller are coauthors of Walk with Me: Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey (Faith Walk). Sally's Girl Talk ... God Talk was recently released by Harvest House. Both friends speak at conferences for women. This article first appeared in the January/February 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Thought Provokers

- *What does it mean to “become more intentional about spiritual friendship”? How can you practice the authors’ suggestions for fostering spiritual friendships as a leader?*
- *What value could strong spiritual friendships add to your position as a leader? What are the disadvantages to being without spiritual friends as a leader?*

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FAITH IN ACTION

Doing Life Together

Looking for spiritual growth and emotional support? It may be as near as your neighborhood.

by Jane Johnson Struck

It was September 1999, and Beth Shadid, then 39, had recently given birth to her fifth baby, Caleb, after losing both her fourth child, Micah, at birth, and her brother, Jim, to lung cancer in 1998.

“The past year had been extremely hard for our family, with two deaths back to back,” says Beth, who has three other sons now ages eight and under. “So when fall came, we were celebrating Caleb, our surprise gift of new life.”

Throughout those difficult times, Beth had grown close to her neighbor Dina, a mom of three. “Dina attended both our son’s funeral and my brother’s memorial service,” Beth says. “She was so kind and sympathetic. Our friendship really deepened, and I felt comfortable opening up to her a bit about my faith in Christ. She’d seen the strength I’d drawn from it.”

Dina, who’d never attended a Bible study before, knew Beth had been involved in various women’s Bible studies throughout the five years they’d lived across the street from each other. So Dina asked Beth if she was planning to join a women’s Bible study that fall. “I didn’t





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think I could possibly pack up my newborn, plus my three other active little boys, and attend a weekly study,” Beth admits. “I recommended a women’s Bible study at a local church in case Dina was interested in attending one on her own. Then I said, ‘But I’d *love* it if someone got something started in our neighborhood!’”

Surprisingly, that “someone who got something started in the neighborhood” turned out to be busy mom Beth—with the able assistance of Dina. Right off the bat, Dina was so excited about the idea of bonding with other women in the neighborhood that she suggested she and Beth start their own group. Before long, Beth, who’d never envisioned herself a facilitator of a neighborhood group with her busy, growing family, became exactly that.

“I’m not a teacher or leader,” she admits. “I’ve been in church a long time and have a strong faith, and I love the idea of being able to share that with others. Yet I don’t see myself as articulate, so I wouldn’t naturally put myself in this position. But there’s something about having come out of pain, as I had, that makes you say even more, ‘Okay, God, if this is what you want me to do, there’s nothing more important in life than being available to you.’ As I prayed about starting a group, it felt like the right thing to do.”

So Beth and Dina brainstormed ways to make a group convenient both for them and the other neighbors they hoped might join. “We decided we’d take turns meeting at each other’s home every other week. We thought we could at least handle that,” explains Beth. “We also decided to be casual about the whole thing and let moms bring their kids. I volunteered to check out hiring babysitters from a local Christian college so we could keep the kids in a play area in the same house.”

But there was also the question of study materials. Realizing some of her neighbors, such as Dina, may never have studied the Bible before, Beth asked a few mature, trusted Christian women what might constitute an appropriate study to kick off the fledgling group. One suggestion that struck a chord: a workbook called *Living in Jesus’ Name*, one in a series of study guides from well-known author John Ortberg.





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“Basically Dina and I decided, ‘Let’s ask some neighbors if they’d like to get together and have coffee.’ We’ll tell them, ‘Here’s a book idea. What do you think?’” says Beth. Then Dina and Beth called around the neighborhood to see who might be interested in participating. Four—including a couple committed Christians—responded positively.

“Everybody was easygoing about what to study,” Beth says, “so when the six of us met for the first time that October, we started working through Ortberg’s study book, which clearly walks you through what it means to be a Christian. It’s filled with lots of practical teaching and spiritual exercises.”

A little more than two years since its launch, the group’s still going strong. In fact, that initial circle of 6 has grown through word of mouth to 18 members, with 12 regular attendees. “We’ll have someone come who’s been absent several weeks, and she’ll say, ‘I’ve missed this so much!’” says Lisa Barry, a fellow believer and one of the charter members who frequently opens her home to the group.

What do the women do when they get together every other Friday morning from 9:30 to 11:15 A. M.? “We chit-chat for the first 30 minutes,” says Beth. “Then we sit down, open our lesson, and talk about whatever jumped out at us that week. Sometimes I don’t have the time to prepare for the lesson beforehand as I’d like. That’s when I throw my hands up and say, ‘Okay, God, this has to be from you. It can’t be from me, because I don’t feel ready.’”

While group members bring their Bibles to the meetings and talk about spiritual topics (currently they’re working through another workbook entitled *Gifted to Serve*, which discusses spiritual gifts), Beth and the other core members work hard to ensure no one feels uncomfortable or offended during the meetings, since the women attending vary in their level of interest in matters of faith. The first year, says Beth, they didn’t even pray together. “Just this last year, we’ve started closing in prayer, and usually Lisa Barry does that for us,” explains Beth.

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The group's slowly evolved into part Bible study, part book club, part cross-cultural awareness, part old-fashioned support group for the women who attend. During the summers, which pose a challenge to regular attendance because of kids' schedules and family vacations, the group opts to read condensed versions of classics such as *Les Miserables* or *Cry, The Beloved Country* instead of Bible-related materials. Beth, who has a heart for cross-cultural ministry, occasionally invites some of the women she encounters through other international organizations to speak at meetings.

Last year, Beth, Dina, Lisa, and the others helped a Sudanese refugee and her two daughters adjust to their new life in the United States by assembling and delivering a "Welcome Pack" of basic household necessities—sheets, towels, plates, canned goods, and personal care items. And last December, Beth and the group organized a holiday gathering that included husbands—a first!—to help two orphaned Sudanese boys celebrate their first Christmas in America.

"This group meets many different needs," says Beth. "On one level, I sincerely believe we all want to learn more about the Bible, to explore what life is really about. But it's also about women doing life together in a safe environment. Just getting together as women helps you realize you're not alone in your situation, that we all have struggles with disciplining our kids or challenges in our marriage. It's wonderful to be able to share not only the pain in life, but the great joys as well. It's just such a fun group of unique women! Our sense of community has been one of its biggest blessings.

"When my husband, Hythem, and I learned at 22 weeks that our baby Micah wouldn't survive after birth, we didn't know how to pray. So we simply said, 'God, do something great through this.' As we prayed that prayer, we sensed 'something great' could be others coming to know Christ through our experience.

"While I don't know if this group's a direct answer to that prayer, I've had many opportunities to share my faith, to let others know how great God is," adds Beth. "As we've grown together, I've seen other women become more open about how God's revealing himself to them. I know that for Dina and a few others in our

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group, their faith has become personal over the past two years. And I've been encouraged to walk with God daily, to keep looking for his presence in my life every step of the way. There's this exciting sense of God at work—all I did was jump aboard!"

Building Deep Connections

Looking for a group that requires a higher commitment but builds deeper friendships? Then a "12 Women" group might fit the bill. Based on the biblical model of Jesus' selection of 12 disciples, Barbara Jenkins, co-author of The New York Times best-seller *The Walk West*, birthed the concept in 1997 during a time of personal turmoil.

"My husband had walked out on our family, and one of my children was caught up in alcohol and drugs. My world had turned upside down," Barbara explains. She sensed a need for something beyond what her Christian counselor, church, and close friends were providing. "I saw in the Bible how Jesus changed the world with 12 disciples. I realized I could benefit from having a trusted circle of 11 other friends to help me carry these burdens."

Barbara wrestled with the idea of this biblically based group for six months. "Finally, I reached the point of saying, 'God, if this is of you, I'll do it. If not, just leave me alone,'" she says. When she shared the idea with a few women, they recommended others who were searching for such a connection. Before long, a diverse mix of 11 women had accepted Barbara's invitation to participate.

"I told them that if they were looking for deeper friendships, then '12 Women' was for them," says Barbara. "I laid out the guidelines: We were to be grounded in biblical truth; we'd commit to meet once a week nine months out of the year; we'd agree to be there for each other through thick and thin. And every week a different woman would be the facilitator."

Each "12 Women" meeting begins with a devotional, followed by a discussion time, then prayer. "We've had lively discussions about everything from money management to the Ten Commandments," explains Barbara. "It's not a gossip session," she adds. "It's a place where we see God working in our lives. Because of the level of commitment in our group, women lower their guard and become real. If

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someone moves or has to leave, they're not replaced until the next 'session' begins. Only God could create this family of sisters that's lasted so long!"

Today Barbara's initial group now meets quarterly. But other "12 Women" groups are springing up around the country or have been spearheaded by original group members. And Barbara and two women from the pilot group recently completed a training session in Brooklyn, New York, for "12 Women" groups. Barbara's also created the 12 Women Foundation and a guidebook, *12 Women: Sisters for Your Journey*, to help others form their own group.

"My '12 Women' group has helped me become more honest about who I am," says Barbara. "Women have a hunger for connection, for seeing God at work in their lives. That's exactly what a '12 Women' group provides."

How to Start a Group... Even if You Think You Can't!

- 1. Don't sell yourself short.** As a busy mom of four boys who didn't feel she had the necessary leadership skills, Beth had every excuse to nix the idea of helping start a neighborhood group. But she's glad she responded to God's nudging. So if you feel this is something God wants you to try, go for it—and watch yourself grow!
- 2. The power of two.** Do you know a neighbor who also may be yearning for a group? While you can go solo, Beth suggests finding a like-minded friend with whom to join forces. Partner together. And don't forget to pray!
- 3. Size it up.** What works best for your schedules? Once-a-week meetings? Every other week? Babysitting provided? Figure out the needs of your potential group, then try to meet them. For example, if most women interested in attending your group are moms of small children, arrange for babysitting—that will make it easier for them to show up! Remember, keep it casual.
- 4. Banish your inner Martha Stewart.** "Every woman likes her place to look nice," admits Beth, "but I think I've set the example there." Meaning: Beth doesn't sweat not having a sparkling home when it's her turn to host a meeting. "My home's a little messy, but come on in anyway," she says. And what about serving fancy goodies to your crowd? "Usually someone volunteers to bring something, but we try

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not to worry about that!” says Beth. All you really need to do is perk a mean cup of coffee, and you’re in business.

5. Have a plan. Beth’s flexible about how she leads the group; when an interesting opportunity crops up, such as hearing the life story of a visitor from another country, she’ll seize it and deviate from the group’s planned study. But make sure you have some kind of study material that’s grounded in the Bible. If you don’t have a clue how to start, ask a trusted Christian friend, your pastor, or your local Christian bookstore owner.

6. Be real. Life isn’t always easy, happy, or tidy. Christians cry, hurt, and get lonely, just like everyone else. So don’t be afraid to show your real face to your friends, when appropriate. It’s the key to helping others show theirs, too.

7. Make it a no-pressure zone. Do your friends feel uncomfortable praying out loud? Then don’t make them. Does a member have trouble keeping up with the lessons? Don’t make it an issue. Your goal isn’t to be rigid, but to build relationships that point women to a loving God.

Jane Johnson Struck is Editor of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article first appeared in the March/April 2002 issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *In what ways do you sense God calling you to lead or participate in a small group or an accountability group with women around you? How open are you to “being available” to God in this area?*
- *What are your biggest concerns when it comes to starting a group? How could God be helping you to overcome those concerns?*





NEW PERSPECTIVES

It's All About Support

What kind of group do you really need?

by Annette Smith

When her last child graduated from high school, Janeen decided to sell the triple-scented candles she'd been making and giving to family and friends for years at her community's craft fair. On the day of the show, Janeen lined up four dozen candles of various scents on a card table and waited for customers to seek her out. Few did. At the end of the day, Janeen had sold only four candles. She calculated that after adding the fair's fee to the cost of her candle-making materials, she'd lost \$35.

Then a sympathetic vendor whose homemade soaps had sold out assured Janeen that when she started, the same thing happened to her. She told Janeen about a craft-for-profit support group that met in the community room of the county extension office. "You're welcome to come," she told Janeen. "We discuss topics such as pricing, creative displaying, and tax laws. Our group members stay on the lookout for low-cost sources of craft supplies. We share information and help each other out."

Janeen attended the next meeting and learned how to package and display her candles more attractively. A group member gave her the



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name of a candle-making materials supplier whose bargain prices enabled her to lower her own prices by one-third. Two meetings later, the entire group cheered when Janeen shared that at her last craft show, she'd completely sold out of her candles.

Likewise, when Beth became engaged, she received oodles of support from her mother, aunts, and three older sisters. After the wedding, Beth called on her family whenever she had a question or concern about married life. No matter what domestic situation Beth encountered, at least one of her female relatives—all of them wives—had at some time in her life been through the same thing. They were glad to help out.

But shortly after her first anniversary, Beth's 23-year-old husband was killed in a car crash. No matter how hard her loving family tried to help Beth, not one of them had ever lost a spouse. They had no idea what it was like to become a young widow.

Beth craved the support, comfort, and wisdom of women who understood what she was going through. Beth found what she needed in a hospice-sponsored community support group for new widows.

Someone Who Understands You

While the term “support group” wasn't coined until recently, the concept's been around for almost 2,000 years. God designed the church to operate as a support group for his people. Since its establishment after Jesus' resurrection, church families have provided believers with a place to belong, share, and work together. Membership in a vibrant, loving church gives support of the best kind—based on loving and caring for each other as Christ loved us.

While both Beth and Janeen benefited from their involvement in secular support groups, it was their church family who provided them with spiritual support. From her church, Beth received unconditional love, constant prayers, and a depth of compassion not available anywhere else. As Janeen's business grew, her church family held her accountable to conduct her business in a fair, ethical manner. Neither woman felt a conflict between her involvement in support groups and her commitment to her church. But what Beth and Janeen found in support groups outside the church was specific information, help, and understanding about their particular situations.





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Perhaps like me, you need the support of a group to lose weight. I've found accountability to a weight-loss group, such as First Place, a Christ-centered health program, aids my efforts. I enjoy sharing recipes, gleaned ideas for incorporating exercise into my life, and hearing the success stories of group members. While I'd prefer not to share this sensitive part of my life with others, when I'm a part of a group, I'm always in better control. Every time I attempt to go it alone, I end up seeking solace in a bag of cookies or a handful of chips!

Sharing with a group helps. Whatever your need or situation, chances are there's a support group tailor-made for you. Don't be nervous. Give one a try!

What Is A Support Group?

It's simply a group of people bound by a common problem, situation, concern, or lifestyle who are committed to helping each other. Members regularly share information, understanding, advice, and encouragement. Support groups exist for almost any situation, topic, or need you can imagine.

Just as support groups vary as to the needs they address, they also vary in size, leadership, and duration. Beth's group consisted of ten women. Once the group was started, no new members were permitted to join. Facilitated by a trained counselor, the group met once a week for 16 intensive weeks. At the end of that period, Beth's group disbanded and another began. Janeen's group met once a month. Leadership changed every quarter, and various committees took care of group tasks such as advertising, procuring speakers, and creating a newsletter.

I've been a member of several support groups during various seasons of my life. Each operated differently. During the year our family hosted a foreign exchange student, we enjoyed monthly get-togethers with other host families. We learned from each other how best to parent a child whose background differed from our own. Early in my husband's career, I joined a support group for coaches' wives to better understand the stress of his job. I learned how to be an asset to him, how I could best support him, and how not to take personally some of the comments I heard when I sat in the stands at his games!

Some groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, La Leche League, and Take Off Pounds Sensibly are nationally recognized and have groups





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meeting all over the world. Others are local, such as the Alzheimer's disease caregiver's group sponsored by my local hospital or the citywide gathering of firefighters' wives I read about in the newspaper.

Other groups, such as MOPS International, which reaches out to mothers of children under school age, or DivorceCare, which helps members grapple with the issues surrounding separation and divorce, are church-sponsored.

How Do I Find One?

Taking the first step is the hardest. First begin checking the community events column in the local newspaper for listings of support groups' meetings and times. Scan the Yellow Pages. Search the Internet. National organizations such as the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, and the American Heart Association sponsor support groups specific to their mission.

If you know of such an organization even remotely related to your need, give them a call. They'll be glad to help. Social workers on staff at local hospitals also are usually knowledgeable about a wide range of community resources and are a great source of referrals. Ministers, physicians, teachers, and librarians are good people to ask as well. If they don't know about a specific group, they often know of someone else who can help.

Internet-based support groups offer an easy way to try out several types of groups, especially for those who aren't sure what format they want, or who would like to learn more about support groups before committing to one. They also are a great alternative for women who are unable to attend meetings, have extremely confidential situations, or live in rural areas where no local support group exists. These virtual groups allow you to "talk" to one or more women, usually through online forums, instant messenger programs, or e-mail. The style, organization, and operation of these groups vary widely. You can locate an online group by searching the websites of major organizations, or try using a search engine. You'll want to look at several search engines and use a variety of words and phrases in your search to obtain the best match.

What Makes A Good Support Group?

Bottom line? It's one that truly supports its members! Along with an environment of encouragement and accountability, a good support group will have the following: a commitment to confidentiality, regularly scheduled meetings, and competent leadership.





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No one group is right for every person, but the most important factor to consider is how you feel when you're with the group. Although no one should expect to feel total comfort at first, within a short period of time, you should experience feelings of ease and belonging within the group.

Should I Start My Own Group?

Sure! If none exists that meets your needs, join with two or three other women and begin one of your own. Start small and enlist the help of others. Contact your local hospital, your minister, or community leaders known to have an interest in the focus of your group. Ask for their help and advice. Early on, delegate leadership tasks to avoid others viewing it as "your" group. Neglecting to do this places all the decisions and responsibilities on your shoulders, hence depriving you of the whole reason for forming a support group—to gain support!

After all, whether you desire to lose weight, need to control blood sugar, or parent an ADHD son, you'll hear no sweeter words than those uttered by a group, "You go, girl! We knew you could do it!"

Annette Smith, an author and women's event speaker, lives with her family in Texas. This article first appeared in the January/February 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *Is there an area in your life that you feel you could use some additional support? How might you benefit from joining a specific support group with a focus that narrows in on a specific need?*
- *What conflicts might women face regarding joining a support group? What are some biblical models or Scripture references that might provide encouragement for joining a support group?*





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GETTING PERSONAL

Why I Resist Accountability

Four reasons why I find accountability difficult.

by Louis McBurney

I had nothing to hide. No reprehensible behavior I was struggling with, no glaring character defects. In fact, I was feeling pretty self-righteous. Doug Self, with whom I've been meeting weekly since 1976, and I were sitting comfortably in front of the fireplace at the Redstone Inn, enjoying our early cup of coffee as usual. We filled each other in on our week's events as usual. We enjoyed the peaceful ambiance as usual.

Then out of the blue, Doug said, "Louis, I have something for you from the Lord."

Not as usual.

Doug proceeded to point out some ungodly attitudes in me that he'd been noticing. He had been hearing me be critical and unloving.

Ouch!

I knew what he was referring to. Frankly, I wasn't interested in re-evaluating my position or changing it.

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The encounter reminded me why I need accountability—and why I resist it. I find accountability difficult for at least four reasons.

I Fear Rejection

“If you really knew what I’m like inside, you wouldn’t want to be seen with me.”

I’ve heard that from countless individuals during my twenty-five years as a psychiatrist. At times I’ve felt the same way. Fear of rejection often makes accountability scary. But the times I’ve come clean, no matter how hard, have led to acceptance and forgiveness rather than rejection.

I learned this lesson early on.

My parents stressed honesty: “It will be better for you to tell the truth than try to lie. If we find out you’ve been untruthful, your punishment will be much worse.” Growing up, I believed that. In fact my fear of the “much worse” was usually stronger than my fear of rejection.

I remember vividly one exception, and it taught me it’s better to open up than get caught.

In fifth grade, there was a new girl in our class whom nobody liked much. Jane was a bit hateful, but I’m sure she had every reason to be. We certainly didn’t treat her hospitably.

One day Jane brought an autograph book to class and asked everyone to sign it and write something to her. At the time, I was learning some things about the world, including my first cuss words. So I thought it would be clever to call Jane a bad name in her autograph book, but to disguise it by writing it backwards. Needless to say, it didn’t take her long to decipher my code—and show our teacher.

The first thing I knew, I was on my way to the principal’s office. Those were the days when a principal could use corporal punishment, and Townsend Thompson was famous for using that authority. What made things worse was that as I entered Mr.





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Thompson's office, the first person I saw was my dad. Then, Mr. Thompson, and then, Jane's autograph book. After a brief and weak disclaimer, I confessed tearfully to the dreadful act. I didn't get the paddle, but I can still feel the sting of my dad's words, "Louis, I'm surprised you'd ever do such a thing. Can you imagine how that must have hurt this young lady? I don't need to remind you that you're a Christian. I don't think that is what you've learned at church or at home."

Then Dad put his arm around my shoulders and said, "I'm not going to tell your mother about this. I think some things should be between a dad and his son. I've told Mr. Thompson he has my permission to punish you in any way he sees fit."

Mr. Thompson asked if I'd learned my lesson; I assured him I had! He then "suggested" I write an apology to Jane and never let that sort of language come from me again. I did, and it didn't.

I still fear the sting of rejection. But I've learned it's always wisest to come clean. I'm glad I learned that lesson with childhood pranks, because I needed it when I faced serious adult situations.

One time, I had to confess to my wife that I'd become emotionally involved with a nurse during my internship. That stupidity could easily have ended our marriage. Only by God's grace and Melissa's remarkable forgiveness did we survive. If I had been open to Melissa or somebody else during that time, the whole thing might have been avoided.

I Feel Embarrassed

The things I confess to Doug, I often fail at repeatedly. That becomes embarrassing. I feel convicted, get up the courage to confess, pledge to quit doing whatever it was, only to repeat the behavior. It may seem trivial to you, but one such problem has been speeding. I have a heavy foot, and out here in western Colorado, we have miles to go to get anywhere (twenty-five miles to the grocery store and post office). What makes it worse is that the speed limit on our winding mountain road is 30 to 50 mph.

I've grown convinced that driving ten mph over the limit is wrong, particularly since our car is known by almost everyone in the valley.





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They know I'm active in our local church and espouse a conservative position. So I make and break and remake my commitment to drive the speed limit. That's embarrassing.

I've heard confessions from hundreds of pastors and leaders who have the same struggle, only in other areas: pornography, lustful thoughts, lack of spiritual discipline, loss of temper, emotional abuse of family members, stealing, lying, cheating on taxes. The list goes on and can become such an embarrassment that accountability is lost.

I Resent Control by Hostile People

I've been blessed by the loving people in my life: my parents, Townsend Thompson, my wife Melissa, Doug, and many others have shown me grace. Being accountable to them has been relatively easy.

It's not so easy to submit to someone angry at you. At Marble, we often work with pastors who have broken faith and trust with the people in their lives. One part of working through those situations is being assigned to an "accountability group." I highly encourage it. Making changes in one's life is hard and especially difficult if attempted in isolation.

The problem, though, is that members of the accountability group—often people from the congregation or denomination—are struggling with their own feelings of betrayal. They are hurt and angry.

The pastors I work with say the experience of an accountability group begins to feel like the Spanish Inquisition. Rather than receive support and gentle admonition, the pastor who has sinned senses total hostility. He's already feeling guilty, and the punitive atmosphere pushes him down rather than lifts him up.

Several years ago, a middle-aged pastor from a growing suburban church came to Marble Retreat. He had been caught in adultery and resigned his position. His wife agreed to work through it with him and restore their marriage. His denominational supervisor and local church board began the restoration process. I believe they genuinely wanted to forgive Jack and restore him to ministry, but they were furious. Not only had he been involved in sexual sin, but he had lied to them on several occasions.





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At Marble Retreat, Jack told us how devastating the experience had been. Not only was he facing the loss of career, self-esteem, and community respect, but every time the accountability group met, which was infrequently, he felt their anger all over again. They said they'd forgiven him, but Jack never felt forgiven. They also directed him not to see or talk with anyone in the church, so he and his wife felt isolated. Jack and his wife found out what leprosy was like.

In his journal, Jack wrote a moving description of his experiences. He wrote as if he had been in Puritan New England and pilloried for his sin. He wrote of the shame he felt standing in the stocks on the town square and the humiliation of seeing the anger and hurt in the eyes of his children. But in the end, his sentence was complete; he was released to rejoin the community. Puritan stocks looked like a wonderful alternative to the isolation and interminable castigation he was facing.

The accountability process can be a healing experience. But if the group members are wounded and angry, accountability deteriorates into hostile oblivion.

I Don't Like Facing My Negative Feelings

I'm a master at self-deceit. I can employ denial, rationalization, and projection so fast it would set old Freud's head shrinking. These psychological maneuvers are mostly unconscious. They pop up automatically when some uncomfortable feeling threatens to jump out of me. I don't like my anger or guilt or anxiety—these emotions just don't fit with who I like to be (or at least like to appear to be). My self-image is that I'm a gentle, open, gracious person who seldom has negative feelings. So I find ways to avoid dealing with them.

Denial is a nifty way. I am able to avoid the unattractive feelings so quickly that I'm honestly fooling myself. I can say, "What, me worry?" or "I'm not angry!" I may be the only one who believes it, which is the real danger.

Rationalization, however, is a conscious mechanism, so I can't claim innocence in employing it. I adroitly look at my situation and justify my behavior. Considering the situation logically, I convince myself that my attitudes or behavior are reasonable. In fact, they're admirable. Perhaps, godly. Yes, that's it. I'm totally justified.





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For instance, I've been seeing changes come into our church fellowship. Changes in the congregation. Changes in the worship style. Changes in emphases. That has not been easy to watch. (Here's where the rationalization takes over.) My concern is not territorial because we were one of the founding families and are protective of the way things have been for twenty years. No, the reason for my discomfort is my deep desire to reach our mountain community. The changes I see may interfere with the opportunity for outreach.

I'm going to try something hard here—that is, not use denial, rationalization, or projection. I want to describe the feelings I've had to cope with during these last months, without justifying them or blaming anyone.

When our new pastor came, he was enthusiastic and eager to prove himself. His stated purpose was admirable: "To grow us deeper spiritually, then let that spill out into our community in outreach." He wanted to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. I certainly couldn't disagree with that vision.

I must confess, however, that with my perception of our church having done that for fourteen years, I felt defensive. Rather than joining in his enthusiasm, I questioned whether our investment and level of spiritual maturity was being depreciated or denied. Changes that were suggested or traditions that seemed devalued loomed as personal attacks. I knew my emotional response was exaggerated and unfounded. Yet there it was. I began to resist and resent many of the new directions the church was headed. The hard part was the clergy who came limping into Marble Retreat, reminders of how elders like me could inflict great harm—even destroy a pastor and congregation!

That's when my accountability group stepped in. They held up a mirror for me to see how unlike my self-image I was being. I can easily say this whole experience has been one of the most difficult of my life. The great peacemaker was contributing great distress. The gentle, gracious lover was adding to an atmosphere of non-acceptance.

Speck-and-Log Removal

Fortunately, I can now report, several weeks after I started writing this article, that some real healing has begun. After my accountability group got my attention, I had some long, painful talks with the Lord. I was





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reminded of God's grace toward me. I had to deal with the speck in my eye, which turned out to be a two-by-four.

I felt convicted that I needed to let the whole church know I'd been creating some difficult pressure for our pastor and ask their forgiveness. I have already asked for and received this.

That confession provided a forum for our pastor to express the pain and resistance he has faced. The current climate, after a couple of tense weeks, is much more godly. Just in time for Easter, there was resurrection and renewal. Our accountability circle has expanded considerably, and I believe in the end there will be new levels of love and trust. We're not totally out of the woods, but it sure feels better to be re-focused on the Lord rather than on myself.

And I rediscovered that accountability works.

Louis McBurney is a psychiatrist and founder of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado. This article first appeared in the summer 1996 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

Thought Provokers

- *Which of the author's four reasons for disliking accountability can you relate to most easily? Why is this particular area a struggle for you?*
- *How is accountability more important than the emotional discomfort it may bring?*





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Accountability in Small Groups

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LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Accountability in Small Groups

Here's what the early Methodists have to teach us about practicing small-group accountability.

from BuildingSmallGroups.com

John Wesley and his friends were appalled at what the Church of England had become. In the words of Wesley historian Kenneth Collins, the church “had grown quite comfortable with and had been compromised by broader cultural trends.” In addition, Wesley was concerned that “the articulate and well-constructed theologies” of his day “left men and women in their sins under the most grievous bondages.”

In late 1738 and early 1739, under the influence of Moravian pietists, the Wesleys began forming small groups for mutual accountability. These groups, called “bands,” comprised about six people and made radical demands on the lives of believers—though no more radical than the gospel. Here are the 1744 Rules of Bands; consider how you could use these to practice accountability in your small group setting.

* * *

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The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16).

To this end, we intend:

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect:

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?

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7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible; that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be, on this and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the five following at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

This article first appeared on BuildingSmallGroups.com, 2005.





Resources

Additional help to help you further

A Spirit Fit to Lead, a downloadable resource from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. When our souls aren't being nourished, it can be easy to bring unnecessary challenges into leadership situations—whether at church, work, or even at home. Maybe we aren't as patient as we could be. Maybe we seek conflict instead of peace. Maybe we ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit when we should be focused on them. This Training Pack contains the help you need to get back on track.

Accountable Leadership, by Paul Chaffee (John Wiley & Sons, 1997). As you've discovered, being a pastor is much more than preaching every Sunday morning. You're faced with all sorts of legal, financial, and ethical questions. This guidebook offers you expert counsel on the most critical issues facing pastors and congregations—creating an effective governing board, stewardship and financial planning, avoiding clergy misconduct, and much more.

Authority and Accountability, Biblical Foundation Series, by Larry Kreider (House To House Publications, 2002). This book in the Biblical Foundation Series helps you to respond to leadership and fellow believers God places in your life. Larry Kreider has designed this book to be used for personal study, daily devotions, mentoring relationships, or small group study. This book will help you to understand elementary principles every Christian needs to help lay a strong spiritual foundation in your life. Daily readings, discussion questions, chapter outlines, and memory verses are included for 4 weeks of study.



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Balance Your Life, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. Chances are you're trying to balance many demands each day, and that you often find you're not feeling rested, refreshed, and balanced in the midst of it all. This download provides encouragement for women who struggle to juggle their lives. You'll encounter real examples of women who've found their hope in the Lord and soared.

Called and Accountable: Discovering Your Place in God's Eternal Purpose, by Norman Blackaby and Henry Blackaby (New Hope Publishers, 2006). Just as He did throughout the Bible, God is still calling His people, at this very hour, to accomplish His eternal purposes in redeeming the lost. God has a unique plan for you to be a part of His mission. *Called and Accountable* thoughtfully explores questions such as: Why does God call us? What is a call? Who are the called? How am I called? When am I called? How do I live out the call?

Called and Accountable: A 52 Week Devotional, by Norman Blackaby, Henry Blackaby, and Dana Blackaby (New Hope Publishers, 2007). Learn to recognize your unique calling and maintain accountability in all areas of your life, cultivating healthy relationships with God, family, church, community, and in the workplace. Based on the Blackabys' bestseller, *Called and Accountable*, each devotion includes a Scripture passage, brief meditation, and prayer starter for each day of the week.

Effective Mentoring, a downloadable resource from **Building Church Leaders.com**. Become an effective mentor for other women. This training tool from Gifted for Leadership authors, who understand your unique role as a mentor, helps encourage and direct you as you become an effective mentor to the women around you.

Faith-Filled Friendships, a downloadable resource from the **Today's Christian Woman Store.com**. God gives us friends for many reasons. One of the greatest experiences friends can enjoy together is helping each other grow in their faith and become more Christ-like. But oftentimes this is easier said than done. This guide offers many ways we can cultivate friendships that deepen our spiritual journey and bring us closer to God.

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Finding Life Friends, a downloadable resource from the TodaysChristianWomanStore.com. If you're looking for friends who can provide you with emotional support as well as help you grow spiritually, you may not have to look any farther than your neighborhood. This study, based on Jane Struck's "Doing Life Together," tells how getting together as neighborhood friends can help us realize we're not alone, that we all have struggles with disciplining our kids or in our marriages, and that we can find trustworthy guidance in searching Scripture together.

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Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

IF you're a capable, called, and gifted Christian woman in leadership, join the conversation at **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This blog, along with downloadable resources, will help you safely converse with other women about the issues you face. You'll walk away feeling encouraged, supported, challenged, and definitely not alone!



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