

**-WHOLE PERSON HEALING THROUGH –  
SELF HELP GROUPS  
A CHALLENGE FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH  
(A Model of Small Groups,  
Peer Managed, Self-Help Counselling)  
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**H**ow can the Church best help persons deal with psychological, physical lifestyle, socio-economic and spiritual concerns that are part of everyday living? Current church programmes offering one-to-one formal counselling are not enough. They are unavailable or expensive, time consuming and reach only relatively few persons. This would frequently be only a stage where their concerns have escalated to unusual proportions. Moreover, many church members shy away from utilizing these services. They fear being stigmatized. In today's urban and industrialized settings, increased isolation, anonymity, and secularisation cry out for active, consistent and effective church based support systems. In Third World cultures and most rural settings worldwide, formal one-to-one counselling, individualistic and secular psychological models are not the usual help seeking approaches. People who are hurt turn to “**friendship**” networks (at a one-to-one group level), to family and to religious rituals. The Church has a divine mission to help individuals and families in their personal growth and development by being a healing community. A very effective way of doing this is to provide informal group-oriented support and so to reach out to its members and their geographical communities in ways that relate to the needs and their local culture. Another question to be answered about the Church's promotion of psychological, spiritual and socio-economic health and healthy physical lifestyles is this:

How can non-professionals (ordinary church members) be best used as peer helpers to stand by, or with, their suffering or fallen brothers and sisters? This is done by the approach of the persons helping one another in the small group setting. This paper seeks to provide a model of church-based group sharing and counselling: The Small-group, Peer-managed, Self-help (SPEERS) approach. This model is not only relevant to most cultures, but will effectively promote individual and community-based whole Person Health in the local church and its surroundings. This is a model that can be adapted to individual church needs. Also it utilizes special group trained lay counsellors to initiate, facilitate and maintain the various small group support activities. It is a model that can have an instant impact in enriching the lives of all those who participate. The church needs to take up the challenge to be a true community where each supports the other.

### **WHAT IS SPEERS?**

The name speaks for itself. It is a special approach to Peer Counselling in the local church. It is mainly:

- A Small Group based
- B PEER-managed
- C Self-help in philosophy. As well as it is:
- D Role related
- E Enrichment oriented

- F Promotive and preventive in focus
- G Enabling in crises
- H Empowered by the Holy Spirit

SPEERS is not for the “*better-off*” helping the “*worse-off*”. SPEERS is about people caring and praying for, reaching out to and helping each other as “*fellow-sufferers*”. (*Galatians 6:1-3, James 5:16*)

## **A. WHY A SMALL GROUP?**

The small group is the basic unit for any form of efficient productivity. People function most effectively in small groups. First, we are socialized into the family group and then into other groups in the community, work setting and other social institutions. The Church as a group of people can be a powerful force for good. Secondly, too often “natural” or traditional groups – Sunday School, cottage meeting groups, church councils, men’s brotherhood, women’s federations are large groups and have become routine and ritualistic in the way they operate. Not enough sharing at a deep personal level takes place. Individualism versus community is on the increase. Worship, educational and evangelistic activities tend to be impersonal. Our model should be that of the early church which truly functioned as a group-based community. They gathered for prayer, lived in togetherness and experienced the power and provision of God’s Holy Spirit in their lives. (*See Acts Chapter 2. Note words highlighting group activity and support versus individualism*). The group is the most powerful human agency of healing.

SPEERS advocates a return to small self-help groups within the church community. It can be the most effective way for tackling the despair, frustrations and life style problems of modern fast-paced living. It is the church’s ultimate challenge and hope for reaching individuals at their point of need – not only to save their “souls” but also their whole lives.

## **B. WHY PEER-MANAGED?**

People need people, especially those with whom they can identify. But the church has to grasp the opportunity to encourage the growth of peer-managed, self-help groups. Peers are persons who share common characteristics, interest, experiences or needs in a common area of service. Such peer groups include members or neighbours living near each other, singles fellowships, students’ groups, youth groups, married couples clusters, family clusters, persons facing common crisis or life situations and church full time workers. In the peer managed group each person can be a leader at some point or in some way. Each person should be given the opportunity and challenge to manage some aspect of the group’s activities. Not all help-giving for personal and spiritual growth has to be done by a professional. Peers helping each other has the widest scope of influence. In this way most persons can be helped.

## **C. THE WHY AND HOW OF SELF HELP**

People who truly seek help often have the answers within themselves. Yet somehow they lack the will, the knowledge or the power to unlock those answers. “*The abundant life*” (St. John 10:10) eludes many in spite of the promise of John 8:36. “*If the son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed*”.

The local church is a community that has the power through the Holy Spirit, to truly enable the potential of self-reliance and mutual support, lay a strong foundation for healing, self growth and enrichment and ultimately for community outreach.

Self help is experienced through the following activities of the Group:

**1. HISTORY GIVING** – Persons within the group will be liberated by sharing with each other. Sharing means revealing about one's self. Group members can share concerns such as:

A) Problems of the whole person. These include the following areas:

- Relationship concerns;
- Physical health
- Lifestyle problems (e.g. obesity, non-fitness, overwork)
- Emotional hurts,
- Family living
- Spirituality
- Socio-economic well being.

B) Painful memories of past trauma during childhood.

C) Co-dependency which involves addictions to:

- Persons (including dependency)
- Substances (such as alcohol, caffeine, food, smoking and prescription and other drugs)
- Places
- Certain behaviours (such as overwork, pleasing others, spending, eating, gambling or rage)
- In the sharing process of history giving, feelings are expressed even by tears.

**2. AFFIRMATION** – each person affirms the good points and helpfulness of the other. This requires active listening by all.

**3. GOAL SETTING** – Group members help one another in seeking solutions to problems as well as new directions in living. This involves the following steps:

- a) Responding to concerns - group members participate in empathizing, sharing and understanding. Members can share common or similar experiences that have been dealt with by God.

- b) Encouragement – This is helpful when it has its basis in God. Practical experience of His assistance can be shared. Encouragement is best if it is not superficial. It needs to be helped by giving hope.
- c) Exhortation - This includes spiritual building up, sharing useful information with and counselling one another. It may involve reproof, confrontation, and confession, but should be mainly positive and empathetic.
- d) Assistance in Problem-Solving or Decision making – Action here is similar to that used in individual counselling techniques. Thus an individual can be assisted in examining alternative options and their likely results. Let the fellow group member decide for himself or herself. One may give information on or offer possibilities to think about, but do no more. It is best that members do not give advice!

#### **4. KIONONIA (fellowship)**

This will involve:

- a) Practical help – such as financial aid, referral to a professional or helping to find a job.
- b) Prayer - in all the above activities the Holy Spirit should lead and empower. His work is sought through prayer. (James 5 : 13-19)
- c) The use of the gifts of the Spirit – This would be in ministering healing of the body, mind, spirit and relationships as well as in dealing with the bondage of evil spiritual forces. (1 Cor. 12-13 )

#### **D. ROLE RELATED SMALL GROUPS**

Small groups or some small peer groups can also be identified more clearly as role-related groups. Such support groups respond to the various roles that individuals are called upon to play throughout the life cycle or according to the various statuses that they may hold in different spheres of life. These roles can be related to the following stages or statuses:

- Age and life stages, for example pre-teen, adolescence, mid-life, retirement and golden age.
- Sex (special male or female groups eg. mothers, fathers, women’s group, men’s group)

- Marital status (married, single, widower, separated or divorced)
- Parenting
- Career or occupation
- Church or community duties
- Consumer status
- Promoting one's wellness.

#### **E. ENRICHMENT ORIENTED GROUP ACTIVITIES**

These are aimed at building the most fulfilling and wholistic quality of life and functioning of persons, partners, or groups in various special situations.

These can include: - single persons, engaged couples, married couples, single parents, professionals and other workers in specific fields or any other of the above role related or peer groups mentioned already. Activities should include a rich blending of spiritual, physical, socially and mentally stimulating experiences. These would be geared towards awareness, whole person growth and more effective relationships and functioning in the context of a particular status, role or age as previously outlined. The enhancing and living out of the victorious spirit filled life should be the primary focus. As Matthew 6:33 promises "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.*" Take time to share, to listen to each other, to pray, to work, to play and to reach out to others. In this way the individual's life will be enriched as well as the church's life.

#### **F. THE PROMOTIVE AND PREVENTIVE FOCUS**

An ounce of promotion and prevention is better than a ton of cure. Wellness promotion as well as the prevention of emotional, relationship, family, physical, spiritual or socio-economical problems are surely the main reasons for encouraging small group interactions – whatever the type of group.

- **PROMOTION** of whole person health will involve re-education and training as well as a renewed understanding of specific concerns. It would include learning new life-coping skills.
- effective stress management,
- life stage planning (e.g. mid-life or retirement),
- personal growth,

- health life-style changes,
- socio-economic skills development and
- growth in one's spirituality.

It will also include: social and prayer support. Whole Person Health Promotion is for the well who wants to remain well.

A focus on **PREVENTION**, means early problem detection, a focus on actual individual concerns before they become crises. Time will be spent in sharing and bearing one another's burdens and facilitating early action for help and change.

## **G. ENABLEMENT IN CRISIS**

Enablement Crisis Groups can deal with unexpected issues such as:

- Bereavement
- Criminal violence
- Rape or other sexual abuse
- Problems at work
- Adolescent crisis
- Mid-life crisis
- Facing retirement
- Adjustment to old age
- Problems in marriage
- Recent separation
- Family violence
- Emotional despair
- Financial setbacks
- Loss of property by fire or theft
- sickness in the family: chronic illness, disabilities, HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's disease and similar problems- one's own illness (physical or psychological)
- other crises or setbacks
- spiritual crises, dryness or loss of hope.

Here groups can be mixed or homogeneous depending on the number of persons experiencing each crisis and the peculiar nature of the crisis (eg. rape). In the local church a

mixture cuts down the fear of stigma. Healing and support in crisis groups call for intensive prayer and fasting for problem solving.

## **H. EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**

For the Christian, the ultimate power for change, for overcoming crisis and for enjoying the “**abundant life**” comes through the work of the Holy Spirit of God. SPEERS will only succeed as individuals and groups submit themselves to serve by asking for and receiving the gift of his Holy Spirit in fullness and in might. As stated previously, the groups have their greatest healing effect when the gifts of the spirit are recognized, sought and used by members in ministering to one another.

## **HOW DO SHARING GROUPS HEAL?**

These are the Healing Factors in sharing groups:

- Universalization - Comfort comes from knowing that most of us experience similar problems,
- Ventilation of feelings – we should not be afraid to express hurt or to cry. Support comes from knowing that we are not alone.
- Learning – being more aware of ourselves and how to grow.
- Growth – moving into maturity through learning, and practicing new ways of relating to God, others and ourselves.
- Giving – the turning point in Job’s life (Ch. 42 vs. 10) was when he prayed for his friends. This is the most important aspect of support groups – giving of one’s self and belongings in love.
- Prayer through which we experience the work of Christ through his Holy Spirit.

## **ORGANIZING A SPEERS GROUP**

### **RULES FOR THE GROUP**

The following guidelines need to be agreed on by all group members. These should be:

1. A covenant of confidentiality.
2. Involvement in sharing and listening (Members should not interrupt).
3. Honesty and Openness.
4. Discipline in regularity, punctuality and apologies for absence.

5. Compassionate diplomacy.
6. No therapist or experts. This means that members should not probe, psychoanalyse, give advice or judge.
7. No pressure is to be on any member to share. The silent member may be hurting a lot and can also benefit.

### **THE GROUP LEADER'S ROLE**

The leader's functions are to enable discussion: to act as a referee and not to dominate. He or she helps to clarify the objectives and ground rules and to manage the practical aspects, otherwise he/she is just another member.

### **THE LEADER'S QUALIFICATIONS** (*See James 3:17*)

Group leaders are most effective when they are:

- "God-fearing", honest and impartial;
- "Pure" – being certain of their own values;
- "Haters of covetousness"
- Exemplary in their Christian life. This is best portrayed in being honest with self, remembering that we all have a "skeleton in the cupboard";
- Humble;
- Mature;
- Patient;
- Non-domineering. (He/she must be the most silent);
- Willing to stay in the background and let other members do the ministering;
- Responsible – facilitating the ensuring of activities and rules;
- A participant (the leader also needs help).

### **PRACTICAL ASPECTS:**

**Leaders:** Leaders can be rotated. The co-ordinating leadership can be rotated once per quarter, 6 months or year. The discussion leadership could be a change from one session to the next.

**Duration:** Sharing groups advisedly last about an hour to an hour and a half.

**Size:** Recruit about 15 persons. Then you may have 8-12 attending regularly.



**Frequency:** The group could meet once weekly, fortnightly, or monthly on a day to be decided. This should be specified in the written guidelines.

**Permanence:** This would be related to the nature of the group and could be decided by the participants. Groups such as those which are crisis and age related below old age, could be temporary.

## **HOW TO START**

Perhaps the most effective way to start a group would be to use the word of mouth or face to face approach, to recruit members. As one gets to know fellow church members, one will sense those with the motivation to be involved; as well as those with special needs that require group ministry. Other methods of promotion such as, church service announcements, bulletin notices, posters and written invitations can also be used.

## **CONDUCTING MEETINGS**

Here are some **SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS** (*Adapted from Brothers Keepers*)

1. Start on time.
2. Have the group leader introduce himself/herself and explain the mission of the group.
3. **EMPHASIZE** the need for confidentiality. Anything said or anyone seen during the session is not to be discussed anywhere outside the room.
4. Let the persons present introduce themselves in an informal manner, i.e. using their first names.
5. Encourage each member of the group to state his/her reason for attending the session.
6. Reinforce the idea that each person is welcome and does not have to tell his story.
7. List the rules that the group will decide to adhere to.

These include:

- a) No advice giving. Experiences can be shared but **NO ADVICE SHOULD BE GIVEN AS WHAT TO DO**. Subtle reminders should be given if necessary, and attention paid to the type of language used. Words such as **OUGHT, MUST, IF-I-WERE-YOU** and **NEVER** etc. should be avoided.

- b) No complaints or blame. Group members will focus on their own thoughts, feeling, abilities and skills etc. bearing in mind that members need to vent their feelings. However complaining about others is best kept to the strictest minimum.
  - c) No criticisms about member's actions. Feedback can be given, but should not be offered unless asked for, or unless the member is being disruptive.
  - d) Leadership must be rotated among the members each meeting being chaired by a different leader. Leader's responsibilities will include:
    - i. Starting and ending meetings on time
    - ii. Picking the topic for discussion
    - iii. Dealing with business matters and or changes in format at the ending of the meeting.
    - iv. Helping the group choose another leader for the following meeting before closing the service.
8. It is recommended that eating or drinking is not allowed while the meeting is in progress as this will only serve to distract from the business at hand. The timing of the refreshments can be decided on by members of the group.
9. Stick to the topic at hand. Avoid the types of doctrinal, political or any other topics that will create a division. Also avoid griping or debating sessions.

These stages of the meeting schedule are to be flexible and agreed upon by the members of the group. Below is an example:

- |                                       |            |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Moment of silent meditation        | 1 minute   |
| 2. Prayer                             | 2 minutes  |
| 3. Opening and explanation of purpose | 5 minutes  |
| 4. Introductions                      | 2 minutes  |
| 5. Discussions of guidelines          | 5 minutes  |
| 6. Sharing of concerns                | 40 minutes |

The steps of HISTORY GIVING, AFFIRMATION, GOAL SETTING and KOINONIA (*see* section C) could be used. At times the discussion of a topic or Bible passage can be included to complement the process (but not as a substitute).

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|------------------------|------------|
| 7. Prayer and ministry | 10 minutes |
|------------------------|------------|

- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| 8. Discussion of business/changes in format   | 5 minutes  |
| 9. Selection of a leader for the next meeting | 2 minutes  |
| 10. Moment of silent reflection               | 20 minutes |
| Suggested length of meeting                   | 1 ½ hours  |
| 11. Refreshments (after the meeting)          |            |

The meeting can be longer or shorter as agreed on by members.

## **TWELVE STEPS FOR HEALING AND GROWTH**

The twelve steps that have been so helpful; to alcoholics anonymous and other support groups could be used as “*stages in the spiritual and personal growth*” of group members (see appendix 1). Members’ struggles and victories in each stage could be shared in group meetings. The twelve steps are particularly useful where persons are seeking to overcome particular ways of relating to self, others, things or God that have been destructive to self or others and have been difficult to change. This applies to each of us at some stage in life.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is hoped that the SPEERS or Small Group PEER- managed Self help approach will be found to be useful in your congregation. As it seeks to be a healing community, leaders and church members are encouraged to use their own initiative and creativity in modifying what has been shared and in relating it to the needs of their local congregation and wider communities. The group is the most powerful human tool of healing. Let us not neglect to use its potential as we seek whole person growth for others and for ourselves.

We can only change, grow and be healed when we are in community.

## APPENDIX 1

### A CHRISTIAN ADAPTION OF THE “TWELVE STEPS FOR RECOVERY” FROM ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.

1. I ADMIT THAT MY LIFE NEEDS A NEW DIRECTION.
2. I ACCEPT THAT A SPIRITUAL POWER EXISTS AT A HIGHER LEVEL AND THIS POWER CAN RESTORE ME TO A STATE OF WELL BEING.
3. I DECIDE TO TURN MY WILL; AND LIFE OVER TO THE CARE OF THIS SPIRITUAL POWER AS I UNDERSTAND IT.
4. I SEARCH MYSELF AND LIST MY STRENGTHS AND MY WEAKNESSES AS HONESTLY AS I CAN.
5. I ADMIT TO GOD, TO MYSELF AND TO OTHER HUMAN BEINGS THE EXACT NATURE OF WRONGS WHICH I HAVE DONE/AM DOING TO ANY MEMBER OF THE HUMAN FAMILY, INCLUDING MYSELF.
6. I AM ENTIRELY READY TO TRUST GOD’S HOLY SPIRIT TO HEAL ALL SHORTCOMINGS IN MY CHARACTER.
7. I HUMBLY ASK GOD TO REMOVE THE BELIEFS I HOLD WHICH INTERFERE WITH MY ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE PEACE AND HARMONY WITHIN MYSELF AND WITH OTHERS.
8. I MAKE A LIST OF ALL THE PERSONS I HAVE HARMED IN ACTION OR IN THOUGHT: AND I BECOME WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS, TO FORGIVE AND TO BE FORGIVEN.
9. I MAKE DIRECT AMENDS TO SUCH PEOPLE WHEREVER POSSIBLE, EXCEPT WHERE TO DO SO WOULD INJURE THEM OR OTHERS.
10. I CONTINUE TO EXAMINE MYSELF, WHERE I AM WRONG, I ADMIT IT PROMPTLY; AND WHERE I RECOGNIZE HEALING AND GROWTH, I GIVE THANKS TO THE SPIRITUAL POWER.
11. I SEEK THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO IMPROVE MY CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD AS I UNDERSTAND HIM.
12. I SEND THE MESSAGE BY THE WAY IN WHICH I LIVE THAT GOD’S SPIRITUAL POWER CAN CHANGE ANY INDIVIDUAL OR SITUATION.

*(Adapted by the Minnesota based Institute of Christian living. Quoted by Dr. Archibald Hart in “Healing Hidden Addictions”.)*

## REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED BOOKS

### How To Order Books Directly

Write the publisher to make an order. Request an invoice from them. Use the invoice to buy foreign exchange from your bank in the form of a draft made out to the publisher. Mail the draft and invoice to the publisher who will mail the book to you.

#### 1. **BROTHERS KEEPERS**

(An organisation providing action for dealing with the root causes and effects of crime and violence) Address –1 St. Lucia Avenue. Shop 27, Spanish Court, Kingston 10, Jamaica.

#### 2. **COLEMAN, Lyman: “ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF SERENDIPITY”**

Publisher – Serendipity House, Littleton, 1980  
Address – Serendipity, P.O. Box 1012, Littleton  
Colorado 80160 USA (A very useful resource book of structured activities)

#### 3. **EVENS, J.R. (jun) & LOUIN, H. “COVENANT TO CARE”**

Publisher - Victor Books, Illinois 1982  
Address – S.B. Publications Inc. P.O. Box 1825, Illinois 6087, USA  
(*Recommended for all group members involved in the group*)

#### 4. **GETZ, Jean A. “BUILDING UP ONE ANOTHER”**

Publisher - Victor Books, Illinois 1977

#### 5. **HART, Archibald “HEALING HIDDEN ADDICTIONS”**

Publisher - Servant Publications 1990. Ann Arbor.  
Address - P.O. Box 8617 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48107 USA

*(Very useful for dealing with recovery from difficult habits and traumatic childhood memories)*

#### 6. **TUBESING, D. TUBESING, N. “THE CARING QUESTION”**

Publisher - Augsburg Publishing House.  
Address - 426 South Fifth Street, Box 1209, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55440, USA  
(*Vital for looking at one’s whole person health*)

#### 7. **RICHARDS, LAWRENCE “69 WAYS TO START A CHURCH GROUP AND KEEP IT GROWING”**

Publisher - Zondervan Publishing House.  
Address – The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, USA

#### 8. **RINKER, ROSALIND “PRAYING TOGETHER”**

Publisher - Zondervan Publishing House.  
Address – The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, USA

Allen, E. A., (1994). Whole Person Healing through Self Help Groups: A Challenge for the Local Church. *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies, Volume 15 (2)*, pp. 30-41