What do I talk about?

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Notes for the conversation in the Soulkeepers meeting

# How is it with your soul?

This is the traditional question for the class meeting. It appears that it was primarily designed to assist the responder in several areas:

1. **Addressing consistent challenges.** This would be alcohol abuse in most cases. Alcoholism as a defined disease was unknown, so the presumption was that the responder could, with God’s help, fight off the urges. We can envision in a working-class meeting that most of the participants would be very aware of the situation and mutually supportive, much as with today’s AA meetings. **Relevance:** abuse of substances is very much among us, as are other repetitive abuses (spousal abuse, violence, anger). However, there are professional groups much better equipped to deal with these than is the class meeting, so this should not be the primary focus of the Soulkeepers. If someone is getting help for a problem, however, bringing that forward would be a very positive step.
2. **Capturing moments of inspiration.** What might have happened in the past week or so that was particularly inspiring to the responder? In the absence of ethnographic studies, it’s impossible to know how much this was a feature of the traditional class meeting, but we should envision it as a major portion. **Relevance:** Absolute. Particularly as a group is getting started, members should be strongly encouraged to share what has inspired them. This will set the tone for “deep dives” later as the group matures. It also inspires others, which is critical.
3. **Relating good works.** What tangible actions of service has the respondent performed in the past week? Giving to the poor, visiting the sick, serving communion—all those tasks that are part of the Christian charge. This was probably the main “positive” in the traditional class meeting, providing the responders the chance to declare their achievements in the faith. **Relevance:** Very high, but modern class members may feel a great deal of reluctance to talk about what they have done for fear of appearing egocentric. As the group matures, this may become easier.
4. **Failings.** In what ways did the responder fall short this week? In the original class meetings, this was probably a major focus. That is reflected in the perception of Methodists as hyper-sensitive to “sin” in a variety of forms. To the world outside Methodism, Methodists appeared to focus on NOT doing things that the culture defined as “fun”—drinking, gambling, card playing, dancing, and so on. **Relevance:** Limited at first, but evolving with maturity. We do not share the 18th century notions of “sin as misbehavior,” instead defining sin as “distance from God.” Is it okay to dance? Of course. What about a game of cards? Probably fine, unless you have a gambling problem. And so on. However, as the group matures, participants are much more likely to reach into their personal failings in profound ways, but that will require tremendous trust in each other.

# Questions for the Beginning Group

Rather than the bald “How is it with your soul?” beginning groups could focus on these questions:

1. **What has inspired you in this past week?** To help move a responder along, focus on the narrative and follow up with “tell us how you felt when that happened.”
2. **What challenges did you face**, and how did you respond to them?
3. **What actions have you taken to get closer to God?**  These could be personal devotions, readings, or “good works.”

# Guide to Responders

Let’s start by admitting that this is unfamiliar to everyone and very hard at first. Here are some things to remember:

1. The purpose of the class meeting is to help you and others examine their lives in Christ. That means thinking hard about what is happening in your life. Do spend some time each week before the class meeting going over what’s going on with you. If you are a journal writer, consider writing down your thoughts in your journal.
2. Don’t start by over-analyzing. Instead, just tell the group what happened, in simple and direct terms. Narrate the events, and then talk about your reactions to them. Always start with the personal story!
3. Don’t apologize! It’s easy to feel that what has happened to us personally isn’t important enough to bring to the group, but each of us is vitally important to God and to each other. We are not all going to have grand revelations each week! The little pieces of our daily lives really matter and help us know when we are moving forward.
4. Be honest! Don’t try to present yourself in a good light or try to hide your doubts and insecurities. Instead, always speak the truth to yourself and each other.
5. Listen to what others have to say. That means no distractions such as cell phone calls or multitasking! Each person deserves their time to share. If a person has trouble staying on topic or speaks too long, let the leader manage the situation.
6. Respond without judgement or advice. If it seems appropriate, ask non-leading questions to help the speaker bring out more.
7. Abide by the covenant!

# Expectations

The group needs to set standard “rules of engagement” that they will abide by. These should be established at the first group meeting as the primary agenda item. Each group will ideally come up with their own rules, but here are some possible areas to cover:

1. No interruptions. Each speaker is allowed to speak without others breaking in.
2. No sharing outside the group.
3. No put-downs.
4. Members will do their best to attend every meeting and be on time.
5. No unsolicited advice. We are not here to fix people!

One model for “Discipleship Covenant Groups” strongly suggests that commitments to specific actions be part of the covenant itself. That is, I might commit to making sandwiches for Betty Chin three times a week, and then I would report my success or failure back to the group. For some groups that are very action-focused, a model similar to this might be useful, although I would suggest week-to-week commitments rather than building them into the covenant itself. Additionally, rather than starting from this sort of commitment, it should arise organically from the group interactions. A group might decide after meeting for some time that they really want to include this sort of goal, and that’s fine. However, a concern about this type of focus would be that the class meeting would become more of a “status meeting” reporting work, rather than a place where spiritual growth is discussed. It could also be disheartening for some class members whose physical or other limitations could prevent them from being able to set and achieve many goals, especially service-minded goals. Definitely these commitments should be individual, rather than group, objectives.