

## Structuring your sessions

- Agree how often you want to meet. That really is up to you, but maybe monthly or six-weekly is good. You'll be able to get the feel of what is right for you all.
- Agree for how long you will meet. It is easy to spend time in chatting, and this has its value, but if you are not finding time to do the real business you might need to set some boundaries.
- Agree how you might structure your time. Without being too rigid some kind of a structure or 'agenda' will help you to use your time wisely, in a focussed way.

One possible structure might look something like this:

### *Friendship Group Meeting*

*Gathering—coffee, chat, catching up (10 minutes)*

*Listening—each person takes up to 10 minutes to talk about how they're doing with God, while the others listen carefully and without interruption (20–30 mins)*

*Conversation—talking together around the issues raised by each member (30 mins)*

*Praying—pray for one another about anything which has come out of your conversation, or any other concerns (15 mins)*

*Next time—are there any issues you'd like to talk further about, or things on which to check up next time you meet? (5 mins)*

# The Community of St Hugh

## Holy Friendships



It is not good for the man to be alone,' said God of Adam in Genesis 2:18. 'I will make a helper suitable for him.' But somehow we have grown up with the idea that our Christian discipleship, our relationship with God, is something we have to do on our own. Various factors have helped us to

think like this:



In modern English we have no different words for 'you' singular or plural, apart from the Irish and Scottish 'youse' and the Southern USA's 'y'all'. When we read 'you' in the Bible our default mode of understanding it is to hear 'me' singular, rather than 'us' plural. But in the Greek of the New Testament the words are

different, and are overwhelmingly plural. Most of the teaching in the Epistles, for example, is clearly addressed to 'y'all'. Discipleship is how we live, together, not how I live alone.

The Enlightenment culture in which many of us grew up has taught us that the individual is more important than the crowd, and our more recent Postmodern culture tells us that what I think, the way I live, is as true and valid as the different opinions of anyone else, and that I do not need anyone else's advice.

And above all most of us are British, and do not easily wear our hearts on our sleeves. Religion and politics are in the private sphere, and it is bad form to talk about them publicly. My relationship with God is my own private affair, and very often when I come to the Lord's table I want it to be just a table for two.

Once we understand this built-in bias within our thinking, we can make more sense of some biblical passages which don't presuppose this individualism. A classic text comes from James chapter 5:

*<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective ...*

*<sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, <sup>20</sup> remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

This kind of idea flows throughout the Bible, leading to the inescapable conclusion that it has never been God's intention that his people should live out their relationships with him on their own, but rather within communities and friendships where we choose to make ourselves accountable to one another. Just think how many of Jesus' and Paul's commands to us we would have to disobey if we chose to shut ourselves off completely from our Christian brothers and sisters. We might be able to love God, for example, but how could we love anyone else? Our faith presupposes that we live it out together.

An important resource for members of the Community of St Hugh is the idea of 'Holy Friendships', or spiritual relationships of mutual accountability. This is about finding and entering the kinds of friendships where we can

love one another, talk and pray together about how we're each doing with God, celebrate together in good times and support one another through bad times.

Of course this is not a new idea. Many of us already know the benefits of having a spiritual director or 'soul friend' with whom we can talk over our praying and discipleship. But holy friendships take this to a new level because they work on *mutual* accountability. It isn't that one person is the expert, teaching an apprentice; we are journeying together, exploring together and discovering together.



### Forming Holy Friendships

Forming these kinds of relationships is all about helping us to grow in our discipleship. It has been helpfully summed up in these three purposes:

- To challenge the sins we are afraid to name
- To affirm the gifts we know we have but are afraid to claim
- To cause us to dream the dreams we long to dream

So a good place to begin is to think about who in your circle of friends you might feel comfortable speaking to at this kind of level of honesty, and who might feel comfortable with you. Who is non-judgemental enough for you to be honest about your failings and weaknesses? Who knows you well enough to be able to see what your gifts really are? And who is encouraging enough to see what you could be, rather than merely what you are now. And how good would you be for someone else in these areas? Pray through these issues and seek God's wisdom for yourself and for your companions.

Having identified one or two people, invite them into this relationship with you and see how they respond.