



Advancing
Women in Church Leadership
FutureChurch

WOMEN GATHERING TOGETHER

LYDIA'S HOUSE

AN EXAMPLE OF DOING WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY IN COMMUNITY

We spent some time in [Philippi]. On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home," and she prevailed on us. *Acts 16: 12-15*

Introduction *We gather...to consider where we stand and who we are. ("A Meeting" by Ann Johnson)*

Lydia gathered by the river with her women friends to share the meaningful events in their lives. Out of this informal gathering grew a flourishing community, the church at Philippi. With Lydia presiding, these first western Christians continued to meet in Lydia's home and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Women often ask, what can we do to nourish our spiritual lives? How can I stay in my church and effect positive change? One way for women to make a significant difference in their lives and their communities is to gather with other women and share their stories. By forming circles and groups for study, for prayer, for sharing women grow spiritually. In gathering together, women are transformed by the Holy Spirit and through each other. When a woman grows spiritually, it transforms her whole life and it transforms the church.

Doing Spirituality *Spirituality is the process of becoming who God created us to be.*

What is "doing spirituality?" While women need to stay in their church and work in all areas available to them, they also need to gather together for spiritual sustenance, for strength, to share experiences. Women must nourish each other spiritually. This is doing spirituality, not just talking about it. It is simple and effective, because the Holy Spirit leads. Always stay open to the movements of the Holy Spirit! The method is organic and process-oriented, flexible and adaptable. Because all aspects of women's lives relate to their spiritual journeys, we naturally ask these questions: Where is God in my life? How do women's lives relate to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Lydia's House: A Model

We offer here a model for women to gather together to share their spiritual journeys. It is based on the principle that each woman's story is valid and authentic as is, because that is her unique experience. Within a woman's unique experience of life she finds her relationship with God and becomes who God created her to be. Three key ingredients are practiced and developed within the gathering: remembering, sharing, and listening.

Remember your story. Through the variety of topics used for presentations, women will be prompted to recall and claim memories and experiences as uniquely theirs, as valid and authentic.

Share your story. Through articulating the events of their lives, women come to new awareness of how they experience God's grace—moving, working, changing, transforming—in their lives.

Listen to others' stories and have your story honored with listening. Through the gift of genuine listening women are healed and transformed into being more fully who God created them to be.

The Process

Here are some guidelines based on experience to help you get started. This model assumes a gathering of 20 or more women who meet monthly. Adapt these guidelines to your group's size and needs.

Gather some like-minded women. Plan to meet monthly. Meet in a neutral place so gatherings can be no-host. Make each gathering self-contained so participants are able to be absent occasionally and newcomers can be encouraged and comfortable in joining.

Name your group. Lydia's House is only one suggestion. It could be Priscilla's House or Phoebe's Gathering or Dorcas' Friends. Use your imagination. There is no wrong way to proceed.

Leadership is two-fold. Shared leadership is necessary. First, create a steering committee to facilitate planning and main-

tenance of the gatherings. Several women will have to assume this leadership, but always leave the planning opportunity open to all. Second, the opportunity to do a presentation is full of leadership and spiritual growth possibilities. Encourage all participants to take turns at presenting a topic.

Program planning. It is critical for participants to be personally invested in the process of doing spirituality in a group; therefore, we strongly suggest that programs be planned and presented by the women who regularly come to the group. Outside presenters don't achieve the same affect. The program does not have to be a professional presentation nor should it be an academic lecture. An effective program presentation is a personal sharing on some aspect of the chosen topic, which involves thoughtful and prayerful reflection and research, and some application of the topic to the presenter(s)'s personal spiritual journey. Select a topic for each gathering that is interesting and relevant to the lives of the women in your group. Topics and the presenters need to be selected several months in advance for adequate preparation time. Plan a yearly calendar if possible. Aim for topics that will evoke thoughtful response and help women get in touch with a piece of their own spiritual story.

Necessary Ground Rules. Keep your gatherings for women only. It is the only way this kind of sharing and spiritual growth works for women. Keep your gatherings Christian and based in Scripture. Assure that all have an opportunity to share and to listen. Listening is more important than talking! NO FIXING, just listen. Confidentiality is a must to create a trusting environment. Expect acceptance of each woman just where she is on her journey. Expect tolerance from all for any diversity of opinions. Stay open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Gathering

Hospitality: Begin the gathering with a period of informal conversation. Invite all to bring a small portion of fruit or pastry to share. Committee would be responsible for set-up and beverages, etc. Women could bring their own special coffee mugs to use as conversation starters. Sit at tables of 4-6 people, if possible, to allow for small group sharing later.

Intentionality: Open with a gathering prayer. (look at "A Meeting" by Ann Johnson in *Miryam of Nazareth*)

Presentation: One or two of the participants will present some angle of the chosen topic and tie it into some aspect of their personal story. Usually a half hour is plenty of time for this portion. Use Scripture and inclusive language.

Small group discussion: This is the most important time of the whole gathering. Presenters provide 2 or 3 discussion questions to evoke table conversation based on each woman's experience of the presentation/topic. Allow about half an hour for this. All women must have the opportunity to share.

Large group sharing: After sufficient time for the small group conversation, allow a spokesperson from each small group to briefly share a summary of her group's discussion.

Closing: prayer and ritual. Be imaginative and create a sacred space. Ritualize the theme of the gathering with environmental decorations, music, song, dance. This can be planned by the presenter(s) or by a Ritual Committee.

Some Suggested Topics for Gatherings — start with these, then use your imagination.

Women in the Bible: Lydia, Mary of Magdala or any other favorite; Women Mystics; Art and Spirituality; Good Enough: Self-esteem; Where Is God in My Depression?; Transitions in Life; Stages of Faith Development; Hospitality; Dreams: God's Language; Must I Choose? (between my church and my gay son: a mother's story); Galatians 3:27-28; Fruit of the Spirit (done singly); Hope: The Christmas Gift; Compassion; Gospel Justice: Women in the World; Spirituality and the Workplace; Eco-Spirituality; The Gift of Sexuality; Jungian Spirituality; Simplicity; Women's Anger; Growing Old Gracefully; Gratitude; Forgiveness; Humor.

Resources and Selected Bibliography for Women's Spirituality Many contemporary women are writing fine books and music with the feminine perspective. Seek these out and use as much as possible. Encourage inclusive language. Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well*, and others; Maria Harris, *Dance Of The Spirit*; Ann Johnson, *Miryam of Nazareth*; Craig Ballard Millett, *In God's Image: Archetypes of Women in Scripture*; Carolyn Osiek, rscj. *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church*; Joyce Rupp, *May I Have This Dance*; all Miriam Therese Winter's books and music. Music by Kathy Sherman, Carolyn McDade, Colleen Fulmer.

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