

AWAKENING THE SOUL

A Guide for Use in Group Settings

By John C. Morgan

Awakening the Soul was conceived as a private devotional book, a simple guide for individuals to use to nurture their own spiritual disciplines. The preface states, “If enough of us begin with our own spiritual disciplines, a whole community may be transformed, or a neighborhood or city or nation.”

As individuals have used the book, they have asked the question “How might this be used in groups or in my congregation?” This guide provides a response to that question.

First, it would help to see how many individuals in your congregation are already using the book; it would be a simple matter to call them together on a monthly basis. If you find that only a few are using the book, you can use this group process to encourage individuals to begin finding their own daily devotional paths.

The format of the book is simple, and the group process should be easy to follow as well. A group can consist of as few as three persons or as many as twelve. Each individual in a group can use the daily readings in *Awakening the Soul* and covenant with each other to meet regularly, preferably on the same day and time each month.

The first meeting of such a group usually generates a shared covenant like the following:

We covenant with one another to meet monthly, maintain a daily devotional practice, maintain a journal, support one another, and keep confidential what is shared in our gatherings.

This covenant was created by a group that has been meeting for over five years and has adopted the following format for each gathering (usually no more than two hours):

Opening Words, Music, or Silence

Personal Check-ins: People share what they wish about their lives or pass. No discussion.

Spiritual Check-ins: (People share something from their reading or lives, perhaps issues with which they are struggling. *Spiritual* here is used in its broadest sense—that which concerns life and death. No discussion, but participants should make actual or mental notes of anything that strikes them during these check-ins.

Support and Dialog: People are invited to respond to what was raised in spiritual check-ins in a helpful, supportive way. This is not a time for criticism.

Closing Time: Usually in silence, but out of the silence, people may speak.

Social Time and Refreshments

Groups vary on the details of how meetings are held, but here are some ways to ground the gathering spiritually:

1. Leaders rotate each month. Meetings are held in each leader’s home. He/she is responsible for facilitating the meeting, watching the time, and providing refreshments for the group.
2. The ritual of a common agenda used each month helps people to feel less anxious about expectations. The agenda suggested above has a flow to it, yet it is open to the unplanned.
3. Silence in a group setting can be very powerful and is encouraged. The facilitator can help the group to recognize when something important has happened by saying, “Could we spend a minute or two in quiet, reflecting on what has just happened in our midst?”
4. Some groups find it helpful to develop a reading list of books or films or music cherished by members of the group. This list grows over time and becomes a resource.

The group does not necessarily have to meet monthly. One congregational committee passed out the book to all its members, and asked them to adopt a private devotional practice. The committee then began each of its meetings with devotional time. The idea was that a committee could be more than a business entity; it could be an expression of the spiritual qualities of the congregation itself.

I have not heard yet of a congregation's governing board using the book, but it makes good sense for the policy-making body of a religious institution to adopt personal and corporate spiritual practices, and what better way to do so than to ask all members of the board to read a common text and use that text to reflect on the business of the congregation?

The book can also be used in corporate worship. A selection for the day or one picked for a particular day can be incorporated into the worship service. Worship leaders can read the selection for the day, pose the question of the day, permit time for quiet prayer and meditation, and end with the final paragraph for each day, which is usually in the form of a prayer. The same process could be used for circle time or opening worship in children's programs.

If, as I believe, people come to our spiritual communities for connections to one another and for connections to what is transpersonal or transcendent, then meeting together in small groups becomes a way to offer both intimacy and ultimacy in our midst. The saying that "churches grow by division, not addition," means that our congregations grow as they create a spiral of small cells, not as they adopt individuals into the larger body. "One body, many cells," are the words someone used to describe this process of deepening our corporate spiritual life, a process that is rooted in the very earliest expressions of Universalism in America, such as the life and teachings of figures like Dr. George de Benneville (1703-1793).

One important consideration that is sometimes overlooked is the question of when to end a small group. The answer is not obvious. Some groups have continued for years. Other groups used the yearly circle of the book for their beginning and ending points. (They meet for 365 days.) You need to check in with the group after it has been meeting for a time to get a sense of what people need.

You might want to keep in mind the following:

1. The group is part of a larger whole, not a congregation unto itself. One of the criticisms of such groups in the past has been that they sometimes split off from the main body of the congregation, creating "a church within a church." The intent of the group should be to benefit not only one another but the whole congregation.
2. The group process is fluid. Groups come and go, as they should. The idea here is to provide a way for people to deepen their spiritual lives and resources, not to create another church committee that outlives its members.

(If you have questions, I would like to help in whatever way I can. I also would love to hear from those of you who are using the book as part of a small group. You can reach me at:

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