

Shalom Koinonia Fellowship Guidelines

(Revision Date: March 27, 2018)

*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,
but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*
(Hebrews 10:25 NIV)

Introduction

God intends for His people to be connected relationally. Per Hebrews 10:25 (above) God's people should meet together to "encourage one another." These guidelines are intended to facilitate meeting together in a way that is consistent with New Testament principles.

While good fellowship can happen with just two or three people meeting together informally, the New Testament speaks of larger groups of people meeting together (Acts 2:46, Romans 16:5, 1Corinthians 11:8, 14:26, etc.). Indeed, much of the New Testament is devoted to instructing God's people how to get along together. Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament are written to a particular "church" (a particular community or assembly of God's people), instructing them how to live and share life together.

Even so, division among God's people often seems to be the norm, rather than unity and love. This is partly due to the many different ways that different people understand the New Testament, as well as the different emphases different people place on different parts of the New Testament. A failure to meet together effectively is often due to people not *agreeing* on important doctrines or not *agreeing* on how to meet together.

These "Fellowship Guidelines" are intended to provide one possible *agreement* for use by God's people in meeting together. They are intended both as a summary of some important New Testament principles, as well as some additional recommendations on how to meet together which are thought to be helpful given present-day culture.

Some groups may embrace some, but not all, of these principles. Other groups may feel a need to add to them. In either case, please feel free to modify these principles for your use, but please remove all references to "Shalom Koinonia" when you do so (a word-processing-friendly version of this document may be available at www.ShalomKoinonia.org). If this unchanged document is used as the guidelines for a group, then the group may optionally refer to itself as a "Shalom Koinonia" fellowship. However, since each group should be autonomous, each group is free to do otherwise.

A Simple Statement of Faith

For meaningful fellowship to occur there must be some beliefs that group members hold in common, or that they have at least agreed to respect. The following belief statements are intended to provide a minimal foundation. They are not intended to exclude people who have not yet embraced these beliefs as their own, but they are intended to limit other perspectives from adversely impacting the group. If a person cannot at least show respect for these beliefs, then they should not be allowed to be part of the group.

We Believe

We believe in one God, who created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1, 1Corinthians 8:5-6).

We believe in Jesus, who is the Christ (the one and only Messiah), the Son of God, Lord of all (Matt. 16:15-17; Acts 10:36). God so loved the world that he sent his only son Jesus, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18). Salvation is found in no one else (Acts 4:12).

We believe in the Holy Spirit, whom God gives to his people (Luke 11:13).

We believe that the Bible is inspired by God. It is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2Timothy 3:16).

We believe that God's offer of salvation is extended to all people (Titus 2:11, Isaiah 45:22). God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). *Whoever* believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). We understand that true saving 'belief' includes repentance toward God and faith in Jesus (Acts 20:21).

Things We Do Together

"How good and pleasant it is for brethren to live together in unity." (Psalm 133:1)

The following list indicates different aspects of fellowship that we aim to participate in together. All of the items listed are not expected to happen at each meeting, but all of them should happen from time to time in a healthy fellowship, as the Lord leads. Please refer to the verse references with each item for clarification.

- **Worship and praise God.**
(Psalm 66; 92:1-5, 100, 103:1-5, 113, 150; Romans 12:1, 15:9-11; Hebrews 13:15)
- **Sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.**
(Psalm 33:1-3, 89:1, 95:1-2, 101:1, 147:1; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13)
- **Give thanks to God.**
(Psalm 106:1, 107:1, 118:1, 136:1; Ephesians 5:20; Colossians 4:2; 1Thesalonians 5:18)
- **Pray for one another.**
(Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6-7; Colossians 4:2; 1Thesalonians 5:17; 1Timothy 2:1-4)
- **Share about how God is working.**
(Psalm 71:17-18, 89:1-2; Acts 14:27, 15:3-4; 3John 1:3-4)
- **Share scriptures that have encouraged us.**
(Deut. 6:6-9; Psalm 1:1-3; Psalm 119; Acts 17:11; 2Timothy 3:16; 2Peter 1:19-21)
- **Encourage one another.**
(1Thesalonians 5:11, 5:14; Hebrews 3:13, 10:25)
- **Instruct and admonish one another.**
(Acts 2:42; Romans 15:14; Ephesians 4:11-13; Colossians 3:16-17; Hebrews 10:24)
- **Share the bread and cup together (remembering that Jesus died for us).**
(Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20; Acts 2:42; 1Corinthians 11:23-34)

- **Water baptism of believers.**
(Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:38-41; Romans 6:1-14; Colossians 2:11-12)
- **Love and serve one another.**
(John 13:34-35; Romans 12:4-10; Galatians 5:13-14, 6:10; 1Peter 4:8-11; 1John 3:11-16)

Some groups may prefer to have one or more persons designated to lead the group through some of these items each meeting, while other groups may prefer less structure, with group members having more freedom to initiate a song, or sharing, or a testimony (etc.). Each group will likely develop its own culture, to some degree, regarding how these things are done.

A Recommended Meeting Outline

While good fellowship can happen without much organization, many groups find it helpful to at least have a general outline to start with. One of the most important aspects of good fellowship is worship, praise, and thanksgiving. Failure to learn to do this well together as a group appears to be a primary reason for weakness and failure of many groups. To help overcome this problem, we aim to prioritize worship, praise, and thanksgiving ahead of other aspects of fellowship.

Ideally, groups should feel free to change direction at any time based on present circumstances and the leading of the Holy Spirit. A suggested typical meeting outline is presented here as a starting point for new groups.

Arrival / Informal Fellowship (15 minutes to 45 minutes or more): A window of time for people to arrive and connect with each other informally. Informal food and beverages may be included during this time (please see comments below regarding food and beverages).

Opening Prayer(s): Commit your time together to the Lord, and ask the Lord to work among you. One or more people may pray, spontaneously or otherwise, per group preferences.

Worship, Praise & Thanksgiving (15 minutes to 45 minutes or more): Group time together singing songs of praise, declaring God's goodness, giving testimonies about God's goodness, and thanksgiving to God. We avoid focusing on various people's needs and problems during this time. Scripture repeatedly calls us to praise God, give thanks to God, and to rejoice in God. Let's do that together. The degree of spontaneity or organization of this time may vary from group to group. Songs may be done with or without instruments. The group should try to avoid being dependent on particular people to initiate and lead songs (otherwise formation of new groups tends to be difficult, since there may not be an abundance of such musical leadership).

Sharing and Learning Time (15 minutes to 45 minutes or more): Share what's been happening; encourage one another; share how Scripture has impacted you recently; discuss what scripture says and how to live out what it says to do; confess sins when appropriate; pray for one another. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15, ESV).

Sharing the bread and cup in remembrance of Jesus' death (1Corinthians 11:23-26): It is because Jesus died for our sins that our sins can be forgiven by God. This simple ritual helps us to remember that key part of our salvation. Some groups may want to share the bread and cup every meeting, while other groups may opt to do so less often. It may be done any time during the meeting that seems appropriate. Wine or grape juice may be used; as well as any kind of bread or crackers. It may be appropriate to allow time for people to share a testimony or to share why the bread and cup are meaningful to them.

End of group time: Close with announcements and/or perhaps a song or scripture reading, or a word of encouragement. It may be appropriate to state a time limit for people to depart by, depending on the host's situation and schedule.

Informal Fellowship / Departure (15 minutes to 45 minutes or more): Similar to the informal fellowship at the beginning of the meeting, this is simply time for people to connect individually or in smaller groups. This can simply be a social time for people to relax together and enjoy each other's company. Food and drinks are optional (please see comments on food and beverages just below).

Some Recommendations Regarding Food and Beverages: Informal food and drinks may be included at the beginning or at the end of the meeting, or at both the beginning and the end, or not at all. Food and drinks may be provided on a "pot-luck" basis by whoever wants to bring them, or a more organized approach may be chosen by the group. Each group should decide how much food and drink is appropriate, and the degree of organization. Some groups may choose to have full meals together occasionally or at every meeting. However, informal food or snacks may be preferred over full meals together to avoid the added burden to the host that often comes with full meals. Full meals together tend to require everyone to arrive by a particular time, and require that some people focus more on meal preparation (possibly adding unwanted stress to some). Informal food at the beginning of a meeting can facilitate people arriving at different times, while reducing the stress often associated with full meal preparation.

Things We Avoid

The following list is intended to protect the group from unprofitable group dynamics. Many of the items listed are grey in nature, with boundaries that are difficult to make black and white. Each member of the group should feel freedom to request a change in group direction if they feel these principles are being violated. The group as a whole (or designated leadership) should then decide whether or not the concern is legitimate and how to proceed.

We avoid disputing over secondary issues. We believe it is NOT beneficial for followers of Jesus to be divisive about beliefs that are not clearly and consistently presented in the Bible (Romans 16:17-18). There should be freedom among God's people to hold various viewpoints about such things. The intent is not to prohibit discussion about secondary issues, but to avoid being divisive about secondary issues. Secondary issues include such things as:

- Various understandings of the "baptism" of the Holy Spirit.
- The degree to which God predetermines or controls everything that happens.
- The degree to which Jesus is one with the Father (Oneness theology), or is distinct from the Father (Trinitarian and other theologies).
- Various understandings of the end times.
- The various ways people outside of our own fellowship meet together and practice their faith.

We avoid theological debates in whole-group settings. Those interested in debating finer points of doctrine should aim to have those discussions with others who are interested when the whole group is not captive to the discussion. The intent is not to prohibit theological discussions, but to avoid quarrelling about theology (Titus 3:9; 1Timothy 2:8; 2Timothy 2:14, 2:23-26).

We avoid focusing on the problems of others. We prefer to focus on our own problems and our own service to God. This is not intended to restrict prayer for others, or to restrict requests for prayer for others, but is intended to help our main focus to be on ourselves and our own relationships with God and others (Matthew 7:1-5, 1Corinthians 5:12).

We avoid unbalanced sharing/prayer/worship/song. We individually avoid dominating group fellowship time. People should ask the group for permission if they want to share for more than a few minutes. When praying in a group setting, we individually aim to keep our prayers short (Matthew 6:7) and avoid continuing from one subject to another without allowing time for others to pray or participate. We avoid dominating times of worship and song. If we have an original song to share, we avoid sharing more than one such song per person each meeting.

We avoid unbalanced focus. We avoid focusing too much on a single person, family, or issue.

We avoid long monologue teaching times. A primary goal of this kind of fellowship is to develop deeper relationships. That generally doesn't happen when one person simply teaches and everyone else simply listens. Likewise, long audio or video presentations should be avoided during normal group fellowship time. If some people want to watch or listen to long audio-visual presentations, or have longer monologue teaching times, try to set up a time outside of regular fellowship time to do that (perhaps an optional time before or after the regular meeting, or another meeting at a different time for that purpose). However, there should be some freedom for people to suggest relatively short presentations (typically less than five or ten minutes), and the group or designated leaders should decide how to handle each suggestion. The intent is not to prohibit teaching times or Bible study as a group, but to avoid long monologue presentations which lack group participation.

We avoid authoritarian leadership. Leaders should primarily be distinguished by their willingness to serve others; not by their ability to assert authority over others (Matthew 20:25-28, 1Peter 5:1-7).

We avoid paid staff. We avoid paying people for their service to the group. We are not saying that having paid staff is wrong; we are merely choosing to have no paid staff to avoid the many problems associated with handling money, and the tendency toward corruption that may come with paying people to do spiritual things.

We avoid handling money. We avoid expecting people to contribute money to the group or to members of the group. We prefer that the group does not handle money at all. Giving to the Lord's work or to various charities should be done individually without involving the group. If the group agrees to participate in an activity together, the expenses for the activity should be paid directly by the participating individuals, rather than by contributing to a group fund, to the extent practical. If a member of the group has a financial need that other people in the group want to contribute to, the giving should be done directly from one person to another, not by taking an offering or otherwise involving the group in the handling of the money. The purpose of this is to avoid the corrupting influence of money to the extent practical, and to avoid attracting people to the group who may primarily come hoping to gain financially.

Some Key Perspectives:

The guidelines above may be sufficient for many groups. However, there are many details that may be beneficial to consider, and there are many pitfalls that should be avoided. The list below attempts to clarify some of these issues.

Love and Honor One Another: It's easy to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. It's easy to not show proper honor and respect to others. It's easy to put ourselves and our own ideas ahead of others. It's easy to want the group to meet our own needs more than the needs of others. Such attitudes and actions are the opposite of what we should be doing. We should make it our goal to do the following in our group relationships:

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

(Romans 12:10 ESV)

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

(Philippians 2:3-4 ESV)

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

(Colossians 3:12-13 NIV)

Choose to Worship and Praise God: Times of good worship and praise often result from people choosing to worship and praise God, rather than waiting for it to happen. Many of the Psalms begin with an "I will..." statement (Psalm 9, 30, 34, 89, 101, 108, 111, 145 ESV, NIV, KJV). This indicates a choice that we make to enter into worship and praise, not waiting for something else to take us there. We should not let our circumstances or feelings keep us from worship and praise.

Make a Joyful Noise!: One of the greatest hindrances to good worship and praise is an expectation of "excellence" along with judgmental attitudes towards those with less skill. Our media-saturated world leads us to think that only people with significant talent should be leading or initiating worship and praise (or even participating in it). In our groups we need to work against that attitude, and develop an attitude of acceptance for all people who genuinely praise and worship God. Remember that God looks at our hearts more than our outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7). "Make a joyful noise unto the LORD!" (Psalm 100:1 KJV).

Music & Song Styles: Everyone seems to have different preferences for music, song, and worship. So, we try to enjoy the diverse ways that people like to worship God, and we don't try to force our own preferences on the rest of the group. Hymns, praise choruses, new songs, old songs, loud songs, quiet songs, fast songs, and slow songs all have a place in worshipping God.

Facilitating Singing Together: Each group should decide how to best facilitate group singing. Some options for helping people to know the words to songs are: simply memorize simpler songs; have someone speak each line slightly ahead of each line being sung; hymnbooks or other kinds of songbooks; personal 3-ring-binder songbooks (each member has their own); project words on a large screen; or utilize smart phones and/or tablet computers.

Silence is Okay: Sometimes group worship time or group sharing time may result in periods of silence. That's okay. Sometimes silence before God is part of worship, part of seeking God, part of experiencing God together. Let's aim to be comfortable with silence when it happens, and allow it to happen.

Leadership: Strong leadership is not necessary for this type of fellowship. If the group meets in someone's home, then the host naturally has at least a minor position of leadership, at least relating to the time and manner that the home is available for the group to use. The original formation of the group may be associated with a particular person or persons, and those people

naturally have some leadership influence in the group. Some groups may choose to have more formal leadership, in which case the guidelines found in 1Timothy 3 and Titus 1 should be considered. However, it should be kept in mind that leadership among God's people is a matter of serving God's people, not controlling them (1Peter 5:1-4). If leadership becomes abusive in any way, members of the group should consider starting another group, with the problematic leader(s) excluded. As already mentioned, we avoid having paid staff.

Note: Some groups depend on one or more gifted leaders to direct and lead the group. In such a case, written guidelines such as these may not be necessary, since the group simply follows whatever the leader directs, and anyone not in agreement with the leader is often expected to remain silent or leave the group. A weakness of that model is its dependence on good strong leadership. Often such groups are unable to function well in the absence of the leader, and such groups may have a difficult time multiplying, since new groups are dependent on new leaders. Groups dependent on strong leaders may also be prone to failure over time, since weakness, or failure, or departure of the leader can lead to weakness or failure of the whole group. These guidelines are intended to facilitate meeting together with or without a strong leader. They are intended to facilitate the formation of new groups without dependence on a particular leader.

Membership: Formal membership is not normally necessary. Each group should consider how to best include or exclude people based on their own unique circumstances. Since God offers salvation to all people through Jesus, and all of God's people are part of "one body," groups should generally aim to be open to all who desire to participate. However, local circumstances may result in a not-so-open policy.

Children: Children may be encouraged to participate in the group to the extent that is practical. Each situation is different, so it is difficult to be very specific. Times of Worship, Praise & Thanksgiving can be geared to include some songs the children are familiar with, and children can participate in that time in other ways as well. However, sharing time may be somewhat restricted with children present, and some groups may prefer to have other activities for children during that time. One option would be to have children participate in the first part of sharing time, and then have them do other activities for a while so the older participants may share about subjects not appropriate for the children. Prayerfully consider what will work best for your particular group.

Frequency of Meeting Together: These guidelines can be used for groups that meet repeatedly and frequently, for a group that meets just once, or for any variation. However, in order to develop deeper relationships, it is recommended that most groups aim to meet once per week, if not more often. Each group should prayerfully consider what will work best for their situation.

Meeting Location: It is expected that most groups will meet in a member's home, or may alternate meeting at different members' homes. Some groups may prefer to meet elsewhere, depending on local circumstances. There are many factors to consider in choosing a meeting place, and such decisions should be made prayerfully. It may be practical or necessary for some groups to rent a meeting place for a short period of time for each meeting. In that case, it may be practical for one or more members to assume responsibility for those arrangements, so that the group itself remains free from financial and legal obligations.

Note: The option of purchasing or renting dedicated space to meet in is not normally recommended. A main strength of this type of fellowship is its freedom from financial and legal obligations. Such a decision should not be made hastily.

Each group is largely autonomous: Affiliations with other groups are on a mutually voluntary basis. When a new group starts, it may temporarily look to the group it originated from for guidance, but the original group should not try to control or have authority over the new group.

Multiplying: When circumstances merit, members are free to start another group, either at the same location at a different time (if the same location is available), or at a different location at any time agreeable to the new group. Group dynamics may be adversely affected if a group grows to be too large. The optimal size of a group is dependent on many factors, but an upper limit of around 20 to 30 people is a good rule of thumb. When a group becomes too large, the group should consider multiplying into two groups. People should generally be free to participate in multiple groups, unless decided otherwise by the groups. Encouraging people to participate in more than one group can facilitate new groups getting started.

Respecting Laws and Government: Governmental authority should be respected, and laws complied with (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Normally, the only exceptions are when the government requires something that Scripture forbids, or when government prohibits something that Scripture requires. In locations with restricted religious freedom, groups may need to be smaller and less formal than in locations with more freedom.

Legal Recognition: In most situations, there should be no need to form a legally-recognized organization. The group is essentially just friends gathering to enjoy each other's company. The need for legal recognition may vary from country to country. In countries that are hostile to faith, groups may need to remain small to avoid legal problems (in such a situation consider multiplying into smaller groups rather than forming larger groups).

Handling Conflict and Division: Conflict should be prayerfully handled per scriptural principles of peacemaking (a possible resource is the book "Hope in the Face of Conflict" by Kenneth C. Newberger). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Col. 3:13 NIV). If sin is clearly involved, then Matthew 18:15-17 may be applicable. If differences persist, then this may be looked at as an opportunity for a new group to form, so that those with unresolvable differences are no longer in the same group.

Serving Others Together: As needs within the group or the surrounding community become apparent, the group members should prayerfully consider how they can be involved in helping provide for those needs. Working together to help others is an important aspect of good fellowship among God's people. However, individual members should not be pressured to participate if they prefer not to.

Finally:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

*And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

(Colossians 3:16-17 ESV)