

Reflections on a Growth partner

Having already read “Those who accompany us on our spiritual journey, “(click on “others” in the sentence before “growth (accountability) partner”), you understand the dynamic interplay between you, your ministry coach, growth partner and others. Below you will find additional discussions that expand and illustrate the role of a growth partner:

Sometime your growth partner may also serve as a spiritual guide, one who helps you discern the will of God for your life. Bobby Clinton describes this experience (*Connecting*):

“Awareness of my need for a Spiritual Guide came through a series of experiences. First, one of my friends took on a leadership responsibility in a church, and he immediately came under pressure. His response to the pressure was to become irritated, defensive, and place some blame on others. As we talked about this after church one

*“Spiritual counsel:
easy, prayerful
conversation between
companions engaged
in a common task”.*

day, I learned he had other pressures at work and home, as well. He felt he couldn't go to the pastor or some of the elders, as they had a vested interest in the outcome and he didn't think they could help with his work and home tensions. I felt frustrated, because I could not be much help to him, and he seemed to be done in. I thought to myself, Boy, I hope I never get in a situation like that . . . without any help!

Then I read a book about “plateauing” in a profession. I thought about the chance of plateauing in my spiritual life and ministry. Since the true power to lead and minister comes from the inner life, not techniques and knowledge, I knew the key to staying strong and growing would be to closely

monitor my inner life growth. But it is not easy to always detect how I am doing, I reflected.

Finally I met a young, gifted pastor at a local conference and shared with him my concern, stemming from my friend's dilemma, about keeping a check on my own spiritual growth. He said he meets with a retired pastor in his area to talk about motives, ideas, plans, etc. This older brother has become a real Spiritual Guide and trusted friend who points him back to God and helps keep his focus on Christ. At the time they were reading *Born Crucified*, by L. E. Maxwell (1945), because his older friend felt the young pastor needed to understand what “being crucified with Christ” really meant for him. I didn't need any more promptings. I started praying and looking for an “older friend” right away. After sharing my desire with several who seemed to be experienced and spiritual men, one responded and we have met several times already. We've begun by reading *Born Crucified* together and it is proving to be an excellent basis for sharing.”

In addition to having an individual growth partner, many have found significant help in their spiritual growth through accountability groups. Stanley and Clinton describe Peer Group Accountability:

“A hybrid form of mentoring occurs in groups made up of peers who meet on a regular basis for fellowship, stimulation for growth, and accountability. Accountability groups made up largely of peers are a form of lateral mentoring. Such groups usually commit themselves to each other for a long period of time. They develop in-depth relationships and a high level of transparency in the meetings. The focus of the meetings may differ—Bible study, prayer, sharing, or whatever—but the major accomplishment is a responsibility for each other. And the openness with which each person shares also allows for stimulation through diverse perspectives. The major functions of lateral mentoring, those of perspective and accountability, can happen effectively in these kinds of accountability groups.”

The following account describes commonalities between discipleship and peer accountability groups with important guidelines that are applicable for any growth partner relationship:

Hearing God's voice through fellow believers

While spending a college semester in France, my wife began considering missionary service in that country. She asked a French Christian what she should do. "Go home," he advised, "pray, and get guidance from your church."

His advice was consistent with a pattern established in Acts. There, the Holy Spirit instructed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which God has called them. "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3).

The counsel of fellow believers is part of God's provision when it comes to making important, life-changing decisions.

John Wesley asserted that "'Holy solitaires' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers." Christianity he said, could not "subsist at all, without living and conversing with other men."

Scripture illustrates this point, particularly in the Book of Proverbs: "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (12:15); "Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise" (19:20); "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (27:17).

I've found that I make the best decisions when I bring a few trusted allies into the process.

For instance, a few years ago I had an excellent job opportunity that was clearly a step up. Before making a final decision, I sought the counsel of fellow believers. It became clear through their spiritual insight that I shouldn't accept the position, and their counsel has proven to be the wisest course.

Recently I found myself struggling with a personal conflict at work. My discipleship group

helped me sort out the issues before gently advising a course of action. Their help was instrumental in healing the conflict.

Here are some guidelines I've found helpful to remember when I've sought the wisdom of fellow believers:

1. The Word of God is our standard, and any advice that runs counter to its teaching should be avoided. On the other hand, mature believers have sometimes helped me discern exactly what God is saying through the Bible.
2. Counselors should be objective about the issue at hand and have a vital relationship with God that includes daily Bible study and prayer.
3. You don't always have to rely on your closest friends when seeking counsel. Sometimes I've approached acquaintances whom I know to be wise—teachers or an adviser recommended by someone
4. Corporate prayer, study of Scripture, and fasting are three disciplines that will help a community of believers seek God's will in a particular situation.
5. The Body of Christ is there to help you discern God's will, not make decisions for you. But God can work through them to clarify issues both large and small.

Paul teaches that the Body of Christ is necessary for Christian living (1Cor. 12:12-26). An essential element of that living is finding and doing the will of God. We should rejoice that we have not been left alone to work through that ongoing task.

This article, by Matt Friedeman first appeared in Discipleship Journal, Volume 73, 1992, p. 54 and is repurposed with permission