Life Streams

Adapted from Renovaré’s bestselling
A Spiritual Formation Workbook

James Bryan Smith with Lynda L. Graybeal
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For some time I participated in two Spiritual Formation Groups simultaneously and was immeasurably enriched by both experiences. The first group was composed of only myself and one other person, the author of this book. The second included myself and three other individuals.

In the fall of 1988, Jim Smith and I started meeting just to see how a nurturing fellowship of mutual accountability might work. I cannot tell you how encouraging and fun-filled those first meetings were: we laughed at our foibles and rejoiced in our successes; we prayed; we made confession; we brought the grace of forgiveness; we made mutual covenants; we challenged and encouraged each other. They were high, holy, hilarious times.

In time, Jim and I were led to study many small group movements such as the Benedictines in the fourth century, the Franciscans in the thirteenth century, the Methodists in the eighteenth century, and Alcoholics Anonymous in the twentieth century. We also began developing a balanced vision of Christian faith and practice and a practical strategy for spiritual growth and much more. The second group came a bit later, and now a third has developed, but each has been equally encouraging. Why do I continue to be in Spiritual Formation groups? Briefly, let me explain why they mean so much to me.

First, I like the sense of community. None of us is supposed to live the Christian life alone. We gain strength and help from others.

Second, I like the nurturing character. The rule for our weekly gatherings is a good one: give encouragement as often as possible; advice, once in a great while; reproof, only when absolutely necessary; and judgement, never.

Third, I like the intentionality. Our purpose is to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. Everything is orientated around this single goal.
Fourth, I like the loving accountability. I need others to ask hard questions about my prayer experiences, temptations and struggles, and plans for spiritual growth.

Fifth, I like the balanced vision. To be baptised into the great streams of Christian faith and practice helps to free me from my many provincialisms.

Sixth, I like the practical strategy. I want and need realistic handles that actually move me forward into Christlikeness.

Seventh, I like the freedom and the fun. These groups encourage discipline without rigidity, accountability without manipulation.

I enthusiastically recommend this workbook to you. It’s a more concise version published in the UK, based on the original US edition first released in the 1990s. It is the fruit of extensive study and research into group dynamics and the nature of spiritual development. It also has the ambience of those early meetings Jim and I had together. And though I have moved some distance from Jim and we are no longer able to meet together, I still remember well those times of high, holy hilarity!

Richard J. Foster
Preface

Life Streams is the result of a remarkable relationship between two unique organisations.

Renovaré (pronounced Ren-o-var-ey) was founded by Richard Foster in 1988. It offers a balanced vision and a practical strategy for spiritual growth. James Bryan Smith and Lynda Graybeal wrote A Spiritual Formation Workbook to help small groups make this vision a reality and thousands of people are now in Renovaré groups around the world.

Lyfe is an initiative of Bible Society, known internationally as British and Foreign Bible Society, founded over 200 years ago. Lyfe is a breakthrough in experiencing God through the Bible in a café, bar or some other public space. It takes seriously the idea that where we encounter God in Scripture is a big influence on what we receive from him.

Renovaré’s A Spiritual Formation Workbook with Bible Society’s lyfe project is an explosive mix of historic orthodox Christian faith and a new way of connecting God, life and us. By doing all this in a public setting, the experience is more intense and more meaningful.

It all started when Richard Foster first stepped into my office back in 1994. I was a lowly editor at his publishing house, but the conversation we had changed my life. Now I not only lead the work of Bible Society but also serve on the board of Renovaré.

The challenge that Richard put in front of me all those years ago was not to see how far apart I could keep God and daily life, but how integrated they could become. Later I developed the original lyfe project as an attempt to connect the Bible to the kind of life that I was experiencing myself. Through Life Streams I pray that you too will encounter the God of the Bible as you try to see how far you can fold your life into his.

James Catford
Group Chief Executive, Bible Society and Chair of Renovaré Britain & Ireland
Introduction

WHAT IS RENOVARÉ?

Renovaré (a Latin word meaning 'to renew') exists to inspire and support individuals in developing integrated and fulfilled lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Christian in commitment, international in scope, and cross-denominational in breadth, it was founded as an initiative working for the renewal of the Church of Jesus Christ in all her multifaceted expressions. Its focus is the local church.

Although begun in the United States, the expressions of Renovaré around the world are led locally with full autonomy to develop within their own cultural contexts. In Britain and Ireland, the first Chair was James Catford, Group Chief Executive of Bible Society. Life Streams is more concise than the original US version of A Spiritual Formation Workbook and reflects the different ways in which people learn and receive their education around the world. The Renovaré website can be entered directly at www.renovare.info or via the US site www.renovare.us, where news updates, pastoral letters, teaching, recommended resources and information on events are available.

How does Renovaré encourage growth in faith and character?

God is inviting us to go on a journey into his heart and into the good life made available through Jesus; 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10.10). But entering into this abundant life takes more than wishful thinking; it takes a well-thought-out, feasible plan. Renovaré exists to put such a plan in place.

The secret of this approach is the combination of three very important ingredients. The first is balance. To be spiritually healthy, we need balance in
our spiritual lives, just as physical health needs a balance in diet and exercise. Renovaré is founded upon the six major areas of discipline found in the life of Christ and the corresponding Six Traditions seen in the history of the Church. Renovaré emphasises balance.

The second ingredient is knowledge. Many of us do not become Jesus’ disciples for one reason: we lack information about the spiritual disciplines. We dream about being true followers, imagine ourselves being committed disciples, but how do we actually do it? What steps do we take? What activities do we engage in that will help us grow closer to God? It is as if we are looking across a great chasm, longing for the other side, discontent with where we are, yet unable to cross the bridge because we do not know how to start. The Renovaré approach provides that knowledge: what to do and how to do it.

The third ingredient is mutual encouragement and accountability. Once we find a balanced plan and a knowledge of how to use it, the only thing left for us is to do it. Unfortunately, for most of us this is the hardest part. Ingrained habits hamper us from changing the way we are. The secret to breaking these ingrained habits is the strength found in joining forces with others who have a similar mission. They provide the encouragement we need to start across the chasm and the accountability we need to keep us on the bridge. Renovaré’s strategy utilises the God-given strength we gain from each other.

**How a Spiritual Formation Group works**

*A Spiritual Formation Group helps you put yourself in a place where God can transform your life from the inside out.* We learn how we can practise the spiritual disciplines, and how to encourage one another in our individual spiritual growth through reflection, discussion, mutual support and prayer. There are some exercises to do at home to deepen our understanding.

There are several advantages of this kind of group:

- It is **intentional**: the single goal is for those involved to become better disciples of Jesus Christ, through practising the spiritual disciplines and encouraging one another.
- It is **small**, comprising between two and seven people.
- There is a sense of **community**: none of us is supposed to live the Christian life alone.
• It is accountable: we benefit from having others alongside us as we face spiritual challenges.

A Spiritual Formation Group is not a prayer group, though it incorporates prayer. It is not a support group, though support is found there. And it is not a Bible study, though the Bible is used by the group. It is a group that focuses on what God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives.

Overall, Spiritual Formation Groups answer the question: What will help me grow spiritually? while each gathering of a Spiritual Formation Group focuses on two issues: What has God been doing in my life? What do I plan to do before the next meeting to make space for him to do even more?

What's involved

A Renovaré Spiritual Formation Group is realistic and practical – and fun. The fruit of extensive study and research into group dynamics and the nature of spiritual development, it is designed to draw people closer to God and to each other. From two to six (or maximum seven) people gather regularly to study, to share their past experiences, and to make plans for the week ahead. This is done easily by following a suggested 'Order of Meeting.'

At this stage, you are seeking to find one to five other people who are willing to gather for nine weeks to test-drive this strategy. There is no one leader of these meetings and everyone who participates shares this facilitating role – which is not difficult. The choice of who will guide the group each week is best made in advance, perhaps at the end of the previous meeting.

During each gathering (which should last between sixty and ninety minutes) that week's leader guides the group through a series of opening words, a question-and-answer session, and a closing time of prayer. Within this flexible format, members are reminded of their task, enabled to hear from one another, share, plan, and dream with each other. It is within this framework that the balance, the knowledge, and the encouragement and accountability are nurtured.

A word of encouragement

If you decide that you would like to form a Spiritual Formation Group, read through several of the sessions on your own. These can be used by individuals as a personal study but, just as it takes 'two to tango', so also it takes at least
two to covenant. That is, the sessions will work best when done in the context of a group of two or more where the members can share and plan and lovingly hold one another accountable.

If you have decided to try this strategy, please keep in mind that we at Renovaré have no desire to control your actions or to demand that you use it exactly as it has been designed. We are committed to the Church, and this plan is our gift to the Church.

Also, we are not concerned that you use the Renovaré name for your group or groups within your church; some simply use the name ‘Formation Group’. For you to grow closer to God and to your Christian sisters and brothers is our heart’s desire. We cheerfully offer you and your church this theologically sound and experientially effective small-group strategy which comes from doing research for several years, listening to God, and responding to the needs of people. May God bless you richly in this endeavour.
How to use this Workbook

The plan itself is very simple. However, you must take a few steps to get a Spiritual Formation Group started. First find a partner or partners and learn about the basic approach. Forming a group is discussed in the next section of this workbook.

At least one, or maybe all Spiritual Formation Group members, lack the first two ingredients necessary for spiritual growth: balance and knowledge. This workbook contains eight sessions that will provide these two ingredients.

- **Session One** (see p.23) provides the 'big picture' that is our model, Jesus Christ, and also our illustration, the Six Traditions of the Church.

- **Sessions Two to Seven** (see pp.31–72) provide a basic understanding of six areas of discipline that make up this balanced diet along with an explanation of how they function in our lives.

- **Session Eight** (see p.73) brings it all together providing you with the tools you will need to do a regular group in the future – if your group chooses to do so.

- We encourage you to meet one more time (Session Nine), using the **Order of Meeting** (see p.79), to give the regular group meeting a try.

Within each session look for the Group Discussion boxes for subjects to be debated within the group. There is also a range of exercises designed for individual or group study. When you reach each of the exercises the Workbook will make clear whether they should be undertaken within the group or away from the meeting. Those exercises done away from the meeting should be discussed at the next group meeting.

Once you have given the group meeting a try, decide whether or not to continue meeting. After the group has gone through the nine-week trial period, it will have:
• a functional knowledge of the Six Traditions
• a knowledge of how they are woven into our daily lives
• practical experience in each area
• a sense of how working as a group enhances our ability to accomplish our goals.

At this point the Spiritual Formation Group will need to decide its future by working through the Evaluation (see p.85) and the series of questions, designed to help the group plan for its future.

We have found it best for those who are willing to continue meeting to make a six-month commitment to stay with the Renovaré approach. At the end of the six months, the group can re-evaluate themselves once again, using the Evaluation chapter. Should any member or members of the group decide to stop here, or should the entire group decide to disband, the evaluation and planning section provides a graceful way to leave or break up. No group or individual should feel pressure to continue in a plan that does not meet their needs. We realise that it will not fit everyone. Even groups that meet over many years need to remember the importance of periodic evaluation.
SESSION ONE

Discovering a Balanced Vision of Christian Faith and Practice

THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

At the outset

A good starting point for this and each of the following sessions is a time of silent prayer for about three minutes. This should be guided by the leader of the session and taken in turn at each meeting. The purpose of prayer is for members of the group to prepare themselves for the meeting by seeking God’s blessing, help and guidance.

After the opening prayer, we move straight to a time of sharing and discussion. The exercises suggested below provide a basis for possible discussion, but they are optional and to some extent dependent on the time available. You could choose one or two, for example, rather than all three.

Another approach for this opening session would be for everyone to introduce themselves. If this is done briefly, there should still be time to look at one or more of the exercises which in themselves will help people get to know each other.

In each session, the suggestions for the time of sharing will be under the heading ‘The Footprints of God’. The discussion pointers will normally refer to the previous meeting or to the time in between when people will have been reflecting on the issues raised or doing exercises of their own.

Later in each session, other topics are suggested for discussion which build on the relevant themes. It is helpful to interact and engage with this material as time permits, since doing so will deepen understanding and help everyone to get to know one another well. How far the discussions go will depend on time constraints and on the group’s preferences.
In this first session, the suggested exercises illustrate the issue of balance in the Christian life.

The footprints of God

**EXERCISE 1**

Jesus Christ functions in four main ways in the Christian's life: Saviour, Teacher, Lord, and Friend.

In our relationship with him, each of us experiences some of these roles more powerfully than others.

Which aspect have you experienced the most?

In which would you like to see yourself grow stronger?

**EXERCISE 2**

In the following list, where do you feel most at ease?

a. at work  
b. with a group of close friends  
c. playing sports  
d. being at home in a garden or reading  
e. with large groups of people

As a way to get to know each other in the group, say briefly what your answer says about you.

**EXERCISE 3**

There are six distinct aspects to Jesus' life and work as described in the Gospels: devotion to God, virtue in thought and action, empowerment by the Spirit, compassion towards everyone, proclamation of the good news of the gospel, and the integration of his spiritual and his ordinary life.

Which of these areas of Jesus' life are you most familiar with?

1. praying  
2. striving against sin  
3. ministering and healing in the power of the Spirit  
4. showing compassion  
5. proclaiming the good news and reading the Scriptures  
6. bringing God into ordinary life
Understanding a balanced Christian life

The discussion will have shown how we are often quite familiar with one way God works in our lives but less so with others. Equally, we are often more aware of some aspects of Jesus’ ministry at the expense of different ones. And we all have distinct ‘comfort zones’.

In a group such as this, we will be challenged to stretch beyond what we know and have experienced already as Christians. Change can be unsettling, but holding too tightly to security keeps many of us from growing. Authentic spiritual growth requires that we venture out of our comfort zones and experience God in new and exciting ways. When we read the Gospels:

- *We see Jesus praying, and we listen to his teaching on the life of intimacy with God.*
- *We see Jesus battling with Satan in the wilderness, and we listen to his teaching on the importance of a pure heart.*
- *We see Jesus ministering in great power, and we listen to his teaching on the comfort, wisdom, and strength that come from the Holy Spirit.*
- *We see Jesus helping the sick and the needy, and we listen to his teaching on the importance of caring for our neighbour.*
- *We see Jesus proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, and we listen to him reading from the Scriptures.*
- *We see Jesus integrate sacred and secular while observing the ceremonies of his faith.*

From this life of Jesus Christ there emerge six distinct areas:

- devotion to God
- virtue in thought, word, and action
- empowerment by the Spirit
- compassion toward all people
- proclamation of the good news of the gospel
- integration between faith and work
This Spiritual Formation approach is based on the life of Jesus Christ. His life was balanced. We want to achieve the same balance in our lives.

**Jesus Christ – the model of a balanced life**

Different influences affect our spiritual lives. To achieve balance, we need to become aware of what influences us and where our response is strong or weak.

The history of the Church has also been marked by different traditions or ‘movements’, a word used to describe how God’s Spirit moved upon individuals and groups of people with a particular mission. These movements, each bringing a focused renewal to the Church, reflect the six main aspects of Jesus’ ministry. When one effort waned, a new movement emphasising another aspect tended to emerge.

The following examples illustrate these movements. Looking at them, and then doing the suggested exercise, can help us towards balance in our lives.

In the fourth century, men and women fled city life to found cloisters and monasteries where they emphasised the importance of solitude, meditation, and prayer. Antony of Egypt was an early leader of these ‘Desert Mothers and Fathers’. The Church was strengthened by their emphasis upon intimacy with God, and a **contemplative movement** was born.

In the early eighteenth century, John Wesley and his friends formed a group nicknamed the ‘Holy Club’ and began focusing on moral laxity and the need for Christians to overcome sinful habits. They developed a ‘method’, and the Church once again took sin seriously. The purifying effects of the Methodist effort were dramatic, and it became a **holiness movement**.

In the seventeenth century the Church witnessed a new outbreak of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women who were called ‘Quakers’, led by the ministry of George Fox. The active presence of the Spirit in the lives of believers became the empowering principle behind scores of conversions. The active role of the Spirit was at the centre of their worship, and it propelled them into evangelism, missions, and social concern. This is an example of a **charismatic movement**.
SESSION ONE

In the late twelfth century Francis of Assisi and a group of followers abandoned their former lives and went about the Italian countryside, caring for the sick, the poor, and the lame. Countless men and women followed Francis’s lead, forming the Franciscan and Poor Clare orders. Their impact on disease and poverty was remarkable. This is an example of a social justice movement.

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther and others proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ after discovering its message freshly in the Bible. This message of hope and victory was expressed by clergy and laity in sermons, mission efforts, and personal witnessing. In the history of the Church it is a wonderful example of an evangelical movement.

In the eighteenth century Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf allowed remnants of the persecuted Moravian Church (Unitas Fratum) to build the village of Herrnhut on his estate. Initially divided, the group became unified when they experienced a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Zinzendorf led them in daily Bible studies and in formulating the ‘Brotherly Agreement’. The Moravians joyfully served God – praying, evangelising and helping other – in the midst of baking, teaching, weaving, and raising families. This is an example of an incarnational movement.

There have been other similar movements, both before and after the examples mentioned above, but certainly these stand out as efforts that had particularly dramatic effects upon the life and history of the Church.

Recognising our strengths

These movements illustrate six Traditions that continue to be apparent in the Church today. If one becomes dominant at the expense of the others, there is a danger of extremes and therefore of difficulties. Division and recrimination can so easily result. This is why we need all six Traditions functioning in our lives. Spiritual balance brings spiritual health.
EXERCISE 4

A wheel is formed by placing spokes around a centre hub. Each spoke must be equally strong and equally long in order for the wheel to function properly. If any spoke is too short, the wheel may roll, but will obviously thump with the effort, not functioning as it should. We, too, will feel the ‘bumps’ in our spiritual lives if one area is stonger than another, as this exercise will demonstrate.

Below is a diagram of the spokes of a wheel. Using a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being the least proficient and closest to the centre of the wheel) estimate where you are in each area on the wheel spokes. Place dots at those points, then connect the dots from spoke to spoke to form a ring around the hub.

This exercise is not about marks out of ten; it is about revealing where we can grow. God has touched each of our lives in important ways and has given us unique abilities and talents. For this we can rejoice and be thankful. Equally, we have areas of weakness in our lives. It is rare to find someone strong in all six areas!
Each person will be different, which is why meeting in a group is so fruitful: we can learn a lot from each other. The potential for growth is enormous so don’t be discouraged. The excitement of this balanced strategy is in becoming strong in areas where we might previously have thought it impossible.

In the coming sessions, we will not only learn about the Traditions in more detail, but we will also discover simple ways to begin working their accompanying disciplines into our lives.

**AN EXERCISE TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE MEETING**

Take a few minutes during the coming week to write a brief ‘letter to God’. In this letter, try to recall the first time you sensed God’s presence and some of the ways God has revealed himself to you since then. Close the letter by giving thanks for all that you know of God now and for all that you would like to know in the future. The letter should be about one page in length, and it will be shared (if you choose) at the beginning of the next week’s gathering.

**Ending and beginning**

It is good to end each session in quiet and prayerful unity.

Passing the Peace: one suggestion is to speak or pray specific words of affirmation to one another, mentioning gratefully what God has done in each person’s life.

Secondly, praying the Lord’s Prayer together is simple and powerful. This is the suggested conclusion to every session. You can choose which version to use. Below are two, one of which is Dallas Willard’s version found in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. Whichever version you go for, it is helpful to pray out loud, together, joining hands if you like.

*Our Father, who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation*
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen

Dear Father always near us,
May your name be treasured and loved,
May your rule be completed in us –
May your will be done here on earth
In just the way it is done in heaven
Give us today the things we need today,
And forgive us our sins and impositions on you
As we are forgiving all who in any way offend us.
Please don’t put us through trials,
But deliver us from everything bad.
Because you are the one in charge,
And you have all the power,
And the glory too is all yours – forever –
Which is just the way we want it!

The Divine Conspiracy, p.269 (HarperCollins, 1998)

Dallas Willard says of his suggested alternative to ‘Amen’: ‘’Just the way we
want it” is not a bad paraphrase for “amen.” What is needed at the end of this
great prayer is a ringing affirmation of the goodness of God and God’s world.
If your nerves can take it, you might (occasionally?) try “Whoopee!” I imagine
God himself will not mind.’

At the end of this and every session, you will need to establish who will
facilitate the next meeting. The job is not onerous: minimum preparation
is required, since the structure and guidelines for each meeting are clear.
Someone different should volunteer each time.