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SIDE

BY

SIDE

WALKING
WITH OTHERS
— IN —
WISDOM AND
LOVE

LEADER'S GUIDE

Side by Side

Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love

Small Group Leader's Guide

Prepared by Edward Welch

For use with

Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love

The goal for *Side by Side* is simple. It is to share our lives with one another by asking for help and giving help and to do so in such a way that we become an increasingly rich, God-honoring, interconnected body. The goal is to change the culture of our church.

Imagine a friend calling you and asking for prayer. That, by itself, blesses *you*. You are honored to pray for your friend. Then, as you pray, you want to see what the Spirit will do, so you plan to follow up, and then you do. Your friend is blessed by your care and will be open with even more personal struggles in the future. You, in turn, will be more open to share your own heart because your friend's vulnerability has been inspiring. Now imagine these conversations proliferating in your church.

Side by Side takes you through the basic skills we all need to ask for help and to give spiritual help to one another. As you grow in these skills, your help will even exceed the boundaries of your church and extend to your neighbors. The brothers and sisters of your local church, however, are especially in view, and the book works best when read and discussed in a small group setting.

This guide has been written to help group leaders plan and structure the study.

How Long Will Your Group Meet?

The book is divided into seventeen short chapters. If you plan to meet seventeen times, simply go chapter by chapter. If you want to slow the pace, include more time for stories about how group members are using the material, and give more time to chapters that generate important discussion. If you want to quicken the pace, here are two ways you can bundle the chapters:

- A twelve-meeting plan:
 - Introduction–chapter 1, Getting started
 - Chapters 2–3, The heart
 - Chapters 4–5, Sin and neediness before the Lord

- Chapter 6, Going public with our spiritual need
 - Chapters 7–8, Moving out because we have the Spirit
 - Chapter 9, Sharper conversations
 - Chapter 10–11, Enjoying one another and hearing stories
 - Chapter 12, Compassion
 - Chapter 13, Prayer when life is hard
 - Chapter 14, Satan and his devices
 - Chapter 15–16, Talking about sin
 - Chapter 17, Telling *the* story
- A nine-meeting plan:
 - Introduction–chapter 3, Essentials for knowing people
 - Chapters 4–5, Sin and neediness before the Lord
 - Chapter 6, Going public with our spiritual need
 - Chapters 7–8, Moving out because we have the Spirit
 - Chapter 9, Sharper conversations
 - Chapters 10–11, Enjoying one another and hearing stories
 - Chapters 12–13, Compassion and prayer
 - Chapters 14–16, Satan and talking about sin
 - Chapter 17, Telling *the* story

How Will Participants Prepare for Your Time Together?

The chapters are short, and most could be read in five to ten minutes, so encourage everyone to read the chapters before coming to the meeting. The goal, however, is to enable each participant to benefit from the group, including those who have not read the chapters in advance or fully assimilated the contents. To facilitate this, begin the meeting with a brief paraphrase of earlier chapters, followed by an overview of the chapters currently under discussion. Some chapters are short enough that instead of offering a paraphrase, you could simply read them together.

How Will You Prepare for the Group Time?

First, keep the larger purpose in mind, saying something like this: “We want to grow in asking for help and giving help—and in doing that, we want to contribute to a growing, Christ-like culture in our church.”

Second, identify where the group has already been, perhaps in this way:

We want to grow in asking for help and helping. In other words, we want to ask for prayer and pray for others. This sounds simple, and it is. But there are skills surrounding those tasks that will take a lifetime to begin to master. So far, we have talked about asking for prayer, and last week we talked about moving out into each other's lives . . .

Third, read the assigned chapter(s), identify key phrases or sentences, consider your own personal applications of the material, and give some thought to the questions at the end of the chapters. You could also take a look at my summary of each chapter that follows later in this guide. If you are bundling chapters, you will have to decide which questions you want to answer together, because an active group can easily spend an hour on two or three questions.

How Will You Structure the Group Time?

Most meetings loosely follow a basic structure:

“Let's pray together.” The time might be framed this way: “We are discussing how we do life together in God's household, so we need to pray.” Then pray or ask someone to pray. These simple realities will not take hold apart from the work of the Spirit.

“Any stories? How have you been applying what we discussed last time? How are you growing?” These questions will naturally and regularly appear once you get to chapter 6. That's when you will be moving out toward others. The questions are not so much for accountability as they are for mutual encouragement—the

stories will bless and motivate others in the group. Have your own story available in case there is a temporary lull in the group conversation.

“What did the chapter say?” You might begin by reading my summary of a particular chapter (below), saying, “Here is what Welch had to say about this chapter.” Then let others bring their comments and questions.

“Let's answer the questions.” I included only two questions at the end of each chapter. My preference is that groups answer fewer questions but have more conversation about those they do answer.

“Let's close in prayer.” This is a time to gather together the themes, visions, and questions that emerged during your group discussion and put them into speech before the Lord.

A Few Personal Comments

My name is Ed Welch. By nature I would prefer to stay in the background, but I am learning that we live in a personal world in which God knows us and we know him, and other people know us and we know them. With this in mind, you will find lots of “we” in the book, and every now and then you will find an “I.”

I am married to Sheri—she is the “Sharon” in the dedication. We have two married daughters and seven grandchildren—all of them are mostly perfect. I have been a counselor and teacher for almost thirty-five years. Most of what I do as a counselor are variations on the themes identified in this book. In this sense *Side by Side* is a kind of counseling platform that has been stripped down to its basic parts, but the platform has innumerable add-ons that give it a broad reach.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Side by Side: Needy and Needed

The introduction says, “Friends are the best helpers.” Even the counseling experts know that. And

the way to be a good friend is to know that you need help and are willing to ask for it. This reminds us that humility is essential to our care for one another.

Chapters 1–6: We Are Needy

The first six chapters summarize a way to understand people (embodied souls with circumstances that can bless or curse) and then challenge us to be spiritually needy before God and other people.

Chapter 1: Life Is Hard

Before we help others, we should *understand* others. The graphic on page 18 gets us started. Those concentric rings contain influences that can bless or curse. For now, we want to identify some of those influences or circumstances in our own lives. Later, we will look for them in other people. When others are blessed, we share in their pleasure. When their lives are hard, we share in their pains. This is how God intends for us to live. As you get to the discussion topics on page 21, here is one especially important point: God never minimizes our difficult circumstances. Instead, he invites us to talk with him about the hardships of life. We don't simply cry; we cry out to the Lord (Hos. 7:14).

Chapter 2: Our Hearts Are Busy

You might find this chapter a little cumbersome, but stick with it. The heart is where the action is, and we want to understand it accurately. Notice how the heart connects our emotional life *and* our spiritual life. Our feelings point to what we believe and who we believe in, and our growing knowledge of and trust in the Lord will shape our feelings. In short, we pay attention to emotions.

The first “Discussion and Response” question on page 31 asks the reader to supply a description of the heart in a sentence or two, so here goes: *Ah, our hearts. A swirling mass of passions, pains, preferences, imaginations, moral commitments or lack of them, and at the center of it all, affecting absolutely*

everything, is our relationship to God. Do we head toward him or away from him?

The second question asks us to connect our emotions to our relationship with the Lord. Following are examples using two of my frequent emotions. First, my fears can connect to my relationship with God in that I believe he will give me what I need, but I am not so sure that he will give me everything I *want* (the health of my family, an easy life, etc.). Second, when life seems overwhelming, I cry out to the Lord or I busily try to manage my own world. My aim is to trust first, not last.

Chapter 3: Hard Circumstances Meet Busy Hearts

Chapter 3 continues the discussion from chapter 2 about how our feelings are linked to our relationship with God. It dramatizes the back-and-forth conversation between our hearts, Scripture, and our circumstances as a way to make that dialogue more obvious to us. Sometimes we hear only our emotions, but more is happening.

The “Discussion and Response” questions (p. 40) continue the idea of writing psalms as a way to get the knack of how to have these conversations. The basic structure is this: speak honestly to the Lord, remember who you are speaking to, and remember some of his promises that have been fulfilled in Jesus. Improvise with these psalms so as to make them your own. The reason I suggest that we paraphrase Psalm 22 is that a paraphrase, even more than a memorized passage, challenges us to really understand what we have read. It also gives room for a few personal tweaks on the original psalm that can make it more our own.

Chapter 4: Sin Weighs a Lot

There is nothing new here—sin is our deepest problem, even more serious than our suffering. But do we believe that? Sort of, maybe, sometimes I believe that, when my sufferings are not too intense. Yet the stakes are high. If we believe that the circumstances of life are more weighty than our sin,

then the gospel of Jesus Christ will not sound very good because it does not alleviate much suffering.

To sin is not good, but to see it is. Only when we remember that we needed to be rescued and need daily washing (John 13) will forgiveness of sins seem especially sweet and sufficiently weighty to counterbalance the pains of life. Only then will we be certain of God's unwavering love for us.

The first "Discussion and Response" question in chapter 4 (p. 47) doesn't give specific direction: "Practice saying, 'I am a sinner, saved by grace.'" If you are addressing this in the group, you could change it to read, "What difference would it make if we lived with the awareness that we are sinners saved by grace?" Imagine it together. How would it affect our quarrels, our joy, our self-consciousness, or our quest to have the best resumes?

The second question is, "How do you hope to grow in confessing sin?" Do you think anyone will be offended when this is asked? Ask them directly. Otherwise, continue to dream and imagine, then pray for such growth and the fruits that come from it. Doing some confession will likely be natural. If your group is made up of men and women, consider dividing the group by gender during this time.

Chapter 5: Say "Help" to the Lord

When you love someone who seems silent and withdrawn, you say, "Please, talk to me." That's the way relationships work, because God has designed us to communicate. This chapter can be summed up this way: Humility before our Father, openness and freedom to speak to Jesus what is on our hearts—these are spiritual fundamentals (p. 50).

The first "Discussion and Response" question references a character, Shasta, from C. S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy*: "How are you like Shasta, not speaking to God?" (p. 56). The answer is easy. Though I speak to my wife and friends about all kinds of things, I speak about fewer matters with the Lord. I have been learning to simply speak more openly with the God who loves and hears.

The second question introduces a skill to which

we will often return. We want to join our struggles to God and his promises—a skill that will grow for the rest of our lives. In this chapter we join our struggles to prayer for help in trouble, prayer of confession, and prayer that we would know our triune God more and more accurately.

Chapter 6: Say "Help" to Other People

Finally, we are moving out. Now is the time to test ourselves. Are we, in fact, spiritually needy? Are we desperate enough to ask for help? Let the change in our church culture begin. To the "Discussion and Response" questions in chapter 6 (p. 64), you could add another: Why *don't* you say "help" to others?

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Chapters 7–17: We Are Needed

The remaining chapters summarize a way to spiritually help and care for others. Each chapter should sound simple, almost natural, and each chapter should invite a lifetime of growth and skill development. Since the chapters now ask us to move out toward others, it's time to ask for stories. How has the group applied the material from the week before? When possible, start the group time with at least one story. Then get to the chapters.

Chapter 7: Remember: We Have the Spirit

Chapter 7 reads like an introduction for chapters 8–17, but it is no mere introduction. It is the reason why we come alongside each other. The world says that only experts can really help. In contrast, Scripture indicates that weak people are the ones God makes especially fruitful. This work of the Spirit can go unnoticed yet deserves our full attention. The "Discussion and Response" questions in this chapter (p. 71) provide an opportunity to reflect on the character and deeds of those who have helped us. These are great stories. Those in the group will probably identify with some of the characters and deeds in these stories.

Chapter 8: Move Toward and Greet One Another

There are two important ideas in chapter 8. One is that our life is a response to the Lord's way of living among and toward us—we treat others as we have been treated. That's why we take the initiative toward others. The other idea is that we want to refine how we see others. For example, if we see as strangers people we don't know well, we greet them politely. However, if we see them as family or even as royalty (created in the King's image), we will greet them with delight and interest.

The first "Discussion and Response" question is, "How does God move toward you?" (p. 77). Perhaps we should first ask, do you believe that God moves toward you? When life is difficult, we can quickly believe that God is on the throne but is relatively unruffled by our plight. The truth is that God is always on the move, always active. Only our sins could keep him away, and those have been cleansed by Jesus once and for all.

The second question asks us to imagine ways we will move toward others. The intent of the question is not necessarily to make more work for you, so think about the opportunities that already exist, especially in your church or small group.

Chapter 9: Have Thoughtful Conversations

"How are you?" When you ask that question, people assume you are being polite and respond to you with the same question. But when those you ask realize that you actually want to know, it takes them by surprise. We don't get asked that question in that way very often. As you ask, keep that graphic from page 18 in mind. Further in, further in—from circumstances to emotions to moral direction to the knowledge of God.

You could start with the second set of "Discussion and Response" questions: "Who in your life is one step ahead of you in knowing people? What does that person do?" (p. 84). Answering those questions reminds us of how we have been blessed by the ways other people have sought to know us.

As you remember those people, you might want to thank them.

The first question is actually a series of questions that get you imagining again. Nothing happens if we have no growing vision for it. Push for specific ways that group members, and you, plan to know one other person during the next few days.

Chapter 10: See the Good, Enjoy One Another

It takes a moment to adjust your vision to see the good in others, but once you start, you will see good things everywhere, and you will want to see more. When you are affected by good things in other people, you enjoy those people. When they hear about these good things from you, you encourage them.

The comments at the top of page 88 sound a bit churchy, but you get the idea. Can you improve on them?

- Your kids are so kind. I'd like to learn how you instruct them.
- Your care for you parents is so encouraging to me.
- I really appreciate how you prepare us for worship.

The two "Discussion and Response" questions in chapter 10 (p. 93) lead us to consider the good things in other people and then push us to actually say something to them. The first question approaches this by helping to identify the people we enjoy and why we enjoy them. Afterward, we can let them know what we appreciate about them.

The second question broadens our vision to include people we might not enjoy, but once we look closely, we see that there is much good. Think about those you see often or know well—roommates, family, neighbors. One way to start is, "I have been thinking about you recently and wanted you to know how much I appreciate _____."

Chapter 11: Walk Together, Tell Stories

Here in chapter 11, you ask the group to be busy and active:

- Do you have a reason for why you try to draw out more from others? Why bother doing this? We need good reasons.
- Who might you want to know more deeply? Does anyone come to mind?
- How might you draw out these stories? Most stories are elicited naturally, and it is difficult to ask about important matters without much context.
- What do you do with these stories once you get them?

The first “Discussion and Response” question let’s us reflect on good stories we have heard (p. 99). We anticipate that there are good stories around us every day, though we might be too distracted to ask about them, or we simply don’t know how to go deeper in relationships.

The second question provides an opportunity for someone in the group to be known to other group members by offering an important part of his or her life. The one willing to open up could respond to one of these questions:

- How did you come to know Jesus?
- What have been the most important influences on your life?
- What experiences from your past have shaped who you are today?

The task for the group is to listen, to know, to link the person’s story with Scripture, and to pray. The larger goal is to gain an interest in personal stories.

Chapter 12: Have Compassion during Trouble

Jump into the “Discussion and Response” questions (p. 110). They will get you where you want to go. Consider discussing question 3, “How do you tell Scripture’s story of suffering?,” before question 2, “What is your growing list of do’s and don’ts with those who are suffering?” Our do’s and don’ts come out of Scripture’s story. I tell a longer version of that story on pages 108–10. You could read it to the group, talk about some of the strengths and weaknesses of that retelling, then try some related

versions. From there you could prepare some lists of do’s and don’ts that come from your understanding of Scripture as well as from things you have heard and said. This chapter could easily span two group meetings.

A note of clarification: I raise concerns on page 105 about misuses of Romans 8:28. The passage, of course, is a fine one, and my wife has used it with me to fine effect, but we rarely use it well. So, at least, let’s delay it.

Chapter 13: Pray during Trouble

The goal of chapter 13 is to gain more skill in making a bridge between our suffering and Scripture. Before you answer the discussion questions, consider a few hypothetical situations. How would Scripture guide you to pray for friends who identify these problems? (The group could add others):

- A pattern of painful arguments with a spouse
- A boss who seems to take credit for some of your work
- A disobedient child who exasperates you
- A roommate who seems cold and indifferent

The “Discussion and Response” questions are less discussion-oriented and more about accountability (p. 121). If you have extra time, you can pray for the needs of those in your group and continue to grapple with how to link those needs to the promises of God.

Chapter 14: Be Alert to Satan’s Devices

Keep in mind that picture of the heart amidst concentric circles (p. 18). Our walk with one another does not occur along a pristine country path. Our path is more akin to the dry terrain of ancient Israel in which robbers, wild animals, and sheer fatigue were constant threats. This is why we come alongside one another when we are going through hardships—hardships can reveal our spiritual vulnerabilities; and Satan, ever the opportunist, pursues the vulnerable. But Satan’s power is limited. His activity is similar to how other hard

circumstances affect us. They can make life especially hard, but they can't make us sin or keep us from knowing God. So we are on high alert, yet we have confidence and hope.

Before you get to the "Discussion and Response" questions (p. 130), think personally. When are you spiritually vulnerable? Look for the following:

- When does your sin seem justified? Satan and the world suggest that sin is not a big deal (cf. his strategy in Eden). Possible victims include those who quarrel and those who cede to sexual temptations.
- When do you believe that God has abandoned you? Satan raises questions about the love and goodness of God.
- When do you believe that you are condemned and backslidden and could never please God again? Look for hopelessness. That is evidence that Satan's lies have taken root.

You might want to switch the order of the questions. The second question reminds us that spiritual battles are fought in spiritual ways, which means that the great themes of Ephesians are effective strategies. These include (1) praying to know God better and to know our calling in him (1:15–23); (2) pursuing unity (2:11–22); (3) praying to know God's extravagant love (3:14–19); and (4) doing so "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:2–3).

The first question gets the group thinking about who needs help in their spiritual battle. Start within the group. Who is alert to their spiritual battle and wants prayer? Your group is where you walk side by side. It is also a laboratory that prepares you to walk with others.

Chapter 15: Prepare to Talk about Sin

The world sees Christians as those who talk about sin a lot and are judgmental when they do. But in our everyday relationships, we rarely talk about sin. To do so requires love that is willing to be

singed by unpleasant reactions. The "Discussion and Response" questions (p. 139) should get you headed in the right direction.

Chapter 16: Help Fellow Sinners

Imagine the members of a church being able to talk about sin in a way that helps and builds people up. Imagine talking to someone about his or her sin and actually having a better relationship afterward. This chapter reminds us of times when we should raise the concern, and it offers examples of how we might do so. The "Discussion and Response" questions (p. 152) are straightforward and should keep a group busy for a while. What stood out to me in the chapter is that when we approach someone with humility and a well-worded question, which invites a response rather than simply accuses, we bless and build up the body of Christ.

Chapter 17: Keep the Story in View

If I had to pick out the most important chapter, I would pick chapter 17. As a counselor I often begin by simply reviewing the story, especially when someone's sufferings or sins seem complicated and overwhelming: "Why are we getting together? Here is why. God knew us when . . ." Reviewing the story, paraphrased by a different person each time, can be a great way to start every Christian gathering. I wish I could hear some of the renditions you will hear.

Conclusion: A Community Works Best Side by Side

Don't forget this section, which could be titled "Get Help When Helping." When you are confused by what you hear from someone, the two of you can seek the wisdom of others. You get more help. That is what we naturally do when we merge humility, weakness, and love with an accurate understanding of the body of Christ.

I welcome your suggestions, comments and stories. Send them to sidebyside@ccef.org.