



Spiritual Journey Leader Guide

Sharing Personal Journeys

A Personal Journey is a description (visual or oral) of the history of your walk with God. It includes a depiction of your life before you met (i.e. began walking) with the Lord vs. after God became a part of your life. It spans the period of time from your birth to current age, with age ranges marked appropriately to succinctly summarize phases of life.

The purpose of sharing personal journeys in your Discipleship group is:

- To share a special part of yourself as you share in authenticity about your walk with God
- As a means of getting to know one another better, your spiritual history and your challenges (both current and those having been overcome) along your path of life
- For others to offer insights into the way(s) God has been working in your life and to celebrate with you your victories along the way

Resources Available

- You have the option of using a chart (distribute to your group ahead of time) to diagram in timeline format your spiritual history

When To Share

- Personal Journeys can be incorporated into any discipleship curriculum
- Select a specific date for one or more persons to share
- Model your Spiritual Journey first (the leader goes first)
- Try to have everyone share their Journeys over a set number of weeks
- Give them advanced time for preparation
- Ideally, each individual in your group will share within the first year

Time Allotment

- Generally, one hour should be set aside per person to include (this is flexible):
 - 30 minute Group Member Presents
 - 30 minute Question, Answer, and Observation Period

The Question & Answer Period

- During the member's presentation, no questions are asked. All members are listening quietly, taking it all in and making internal observations about God's intervention and presence in his/her life.
- Once the presentation is complete, the leader may thank him/her for sharing and may invite other group members to ask questions for clarification.
- The leader may then encourage other members to share their positive observations so the presenter comes away with additional insights and/or affirmation and encouragement, celebrating the spiritual victories along the way. The leader should ask "How do you see God working in the presenter's story? What character of God is revealed when you look at their overall story?"
- Sometimes, a personal issue of sensitive nature will be disclosed and you may feel led (in the moment) to pray as a group for the member. As a leader, if you feel the Spirit's prompting to pray, you should invite the group at that moment to do so. The suggestion to



pray may also come from another group member, whom you should also encourage for making the suggestion.

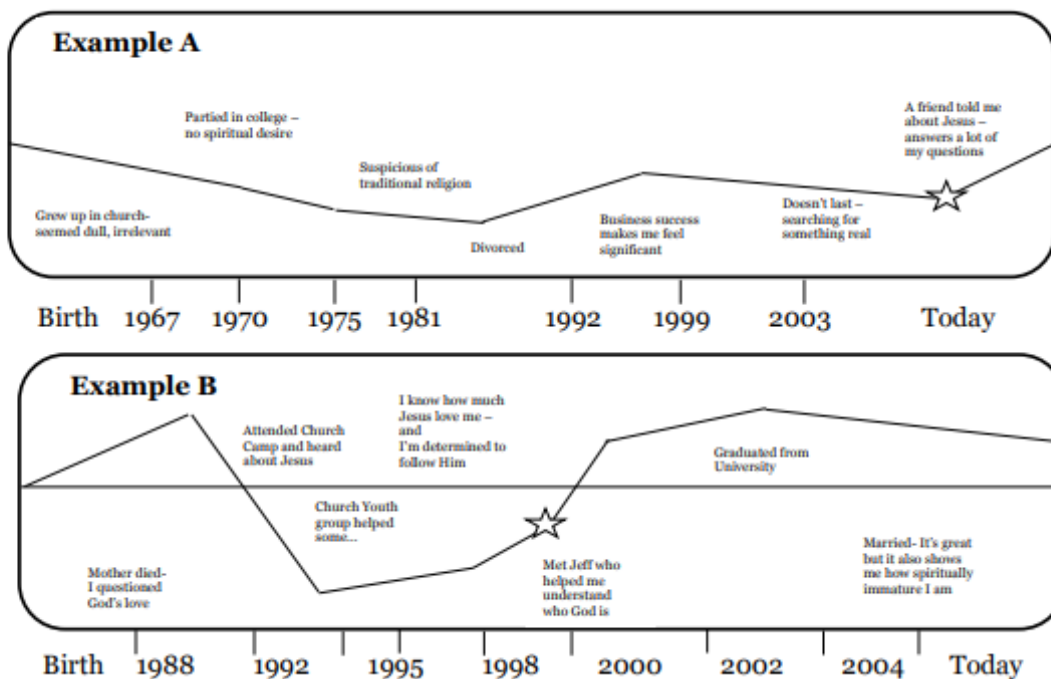
- And always maintain confidentiality. The story we just heard is their story to tell, not ours. Let's not violate the sacred trust and confidentiality we all committed to in the covenant.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY EXAMPLE

Has it ever occurred to you that your life is a story in the making – a story that matters?

One of the foundational exercises of life-to-life discipleship is taking time to reflect on your life story up to this point; what we call your spiritual journey. This exercise is useful for helping you and your Discipleship Group understand where you're at right now, what drives you, and what matters to you. It may be a difficult exercise for you, but rest assured, you will see the value of it the moment you begin thinking about the significant events and patterns in your life. It could take you a few moments to complete, or a few weeks depending on how deeply you begin mulling over your life.

Here's how to do it. On the document entitled "My Spiritual Journey (blank)" you're going to have an opportunity to draw a picture of your life story. You will be drawing a line graph that plots how you think about the twists and turns of your life story. They can represent significant events, turning points, changes in your view of life, experiences, trials, or triumphs. What matters is that when you look at the picture, you can recognize it as an honest representation of your spiritual journey so far. Place a star where you believe you became a true follower of Christ. A few examples are provided below. You can draw yours on the next page.





Spiritual Journey (Form)

Divide this timeline into segments that best represent your spiritual journey. Place a star where you believe you became a follower of Christ.

Negative Spiritual Experiences

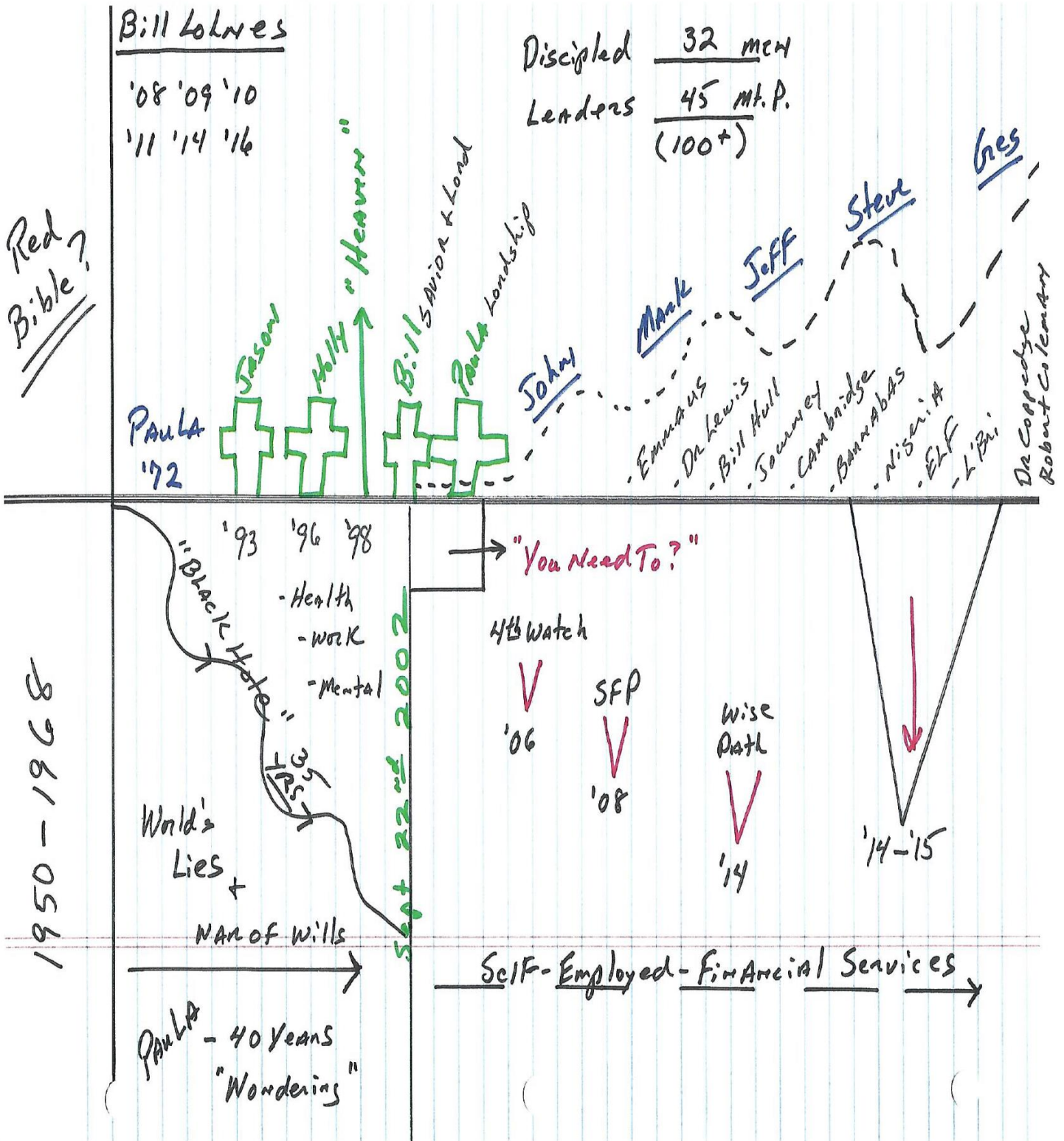
Positive Spiritual Experiences

Birth

Today



Bill Lohnes Spiritual Journey





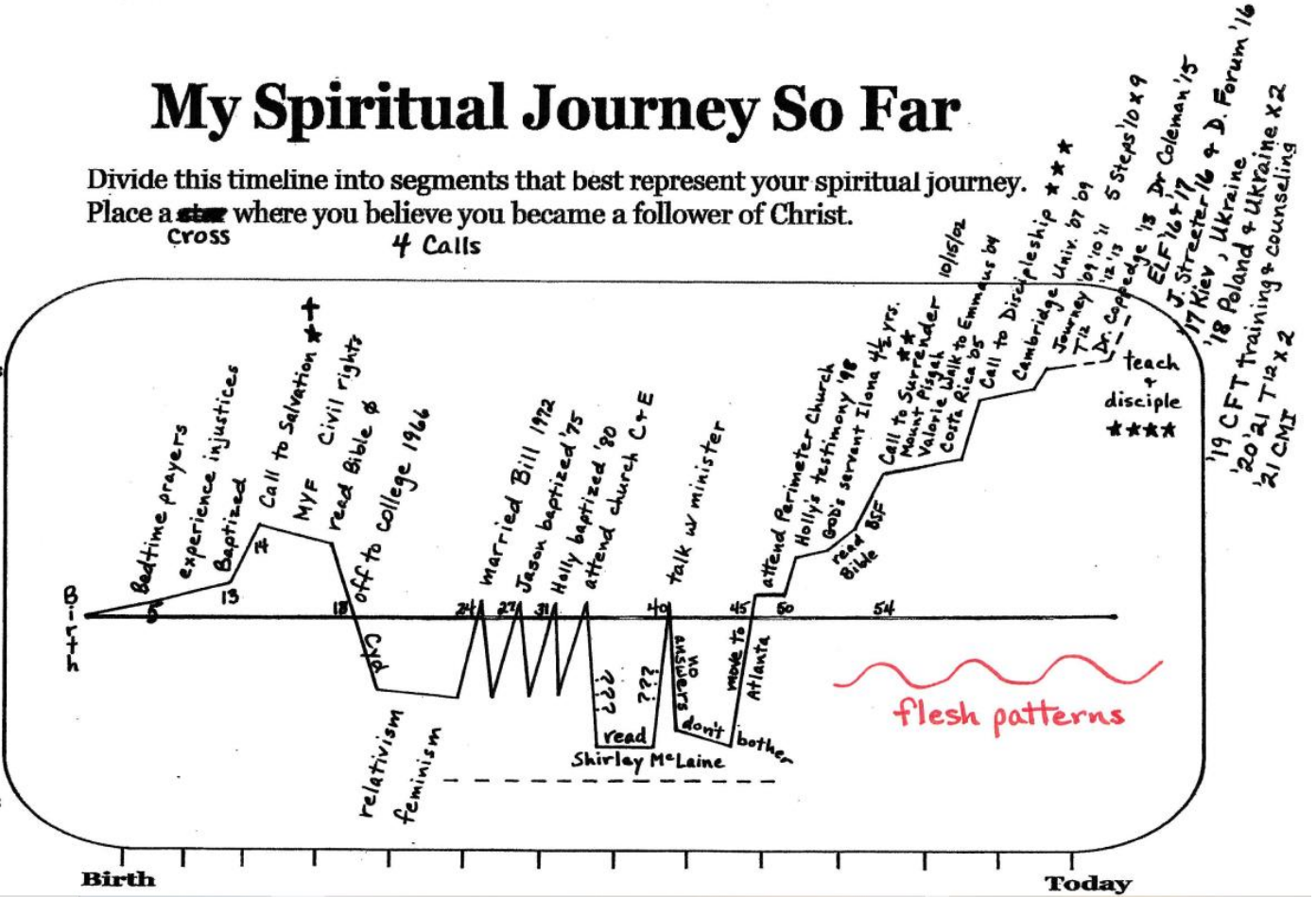
Paula Lohnes Spiritual Journey

My Spiritual Journey So Far

Divide this timeline into segments that best represent your spiritual journey. Place a ~~star~~ where you believe you became a follower of Christ.

positive spiritual experiences

negative spiritual experiences





Sharing Our Stories

John Purcell

Real Christian community is about sharing life together. Jesus showed us what that means when he called the twelve to follow him, to live with him, to do life with him. Then Paul and Peter followed his example. In 1 Thes 1 and 2 Paul describes his interaction with the Thessalonians that was intimate, gentle as a mother, and exhorting and encouraging as a father. What better picture of sharing life could we have than that of a family?

The beginning of life together or deepening of our life together can come with our "knowing" each other in a significant way. Even if we have been acquaintances, friends, or even family for years, we probably don't know the impact of life events or patterns on each other or many of the true joys and struggles of our current situations.

That is why we tell our stories to each other, as a beginning of a redemptive relationship or a deepening of one.

In the church, where is it appropriate to do this? The question is, where do we think God would want us to have this level of deep relationships? Discipleship groups, other kinds of small groups, church board teams, staffs, ministry teams of all kinds, and the family are all candidates for this kind of "knowing." So first decide whether your group is a candidate. Do you want your ministries in the "trenches" to have this kind of community? If so, then consider that you must model that from the "top" of the church organization, starting with the board and the staff.

Be aware that a same-gender group or team will naturally be able to go much deeper than a mixed-gender one. Why? This will be risky for most, and it's safer if no spouses are there and even if no one of the opposite gender is there. So, if you have a mixed-gender group, consider breaking up to do this in separate male and female groups (or just understand that the stories will not go as deep if you all stay together).

For a group or team that has decided to share its stories, here are some guidelines I would suggest you consider:

Why are you doing it?

You tell your stories in order to get to know each other at a deep level that will result in these benefits:

- It will lead to loving each other, Jesus' great commandment, and even loving each other as Christ loves us, His "new commandment" that He gave to the disciples.



- It will allow you to truly minister to each other.
- It will create an environment that is safe, leading to true vulnerability, which is necessary for transformation (*Surrender to Love*, David Benner).
- It will develop true trust in each other, the foundation for getting results (from *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni). True trust will allow you to confront in love, which will foster commitment to common goals and decisions, which must precede accountability to follow-through, which is necessary for attention to results.
- You will be modeling to others in the church the community you want them to have in their ministries.

When should you do it?

It would be great to share your stories when the group or team first comes together, in order to let God knit your hearts before you even attempt to grow or serve together. However, you can also do it with an existing group or team that has been together for a short or long time.

How can you introduce the idea to your group?

Talk about your PERSONAL desire to get to know them better and to minister together out of Christ-centered relationship. Share with them the benefits listed above. Allow them to express concerns. Allow them time to pray about it. Make sure it's truly a group decision, without any coercion.

How can you set it up?

The ideal setting for sharing your stories would be a retreat setting, with an extended time set aside just for this, allowing significant time and focus in a relaxed atmosphere. If you can't work this out, you can have one person at a time share his or her story as a part of your regular meeting time, as long as it is "protected time," meaning not rushed and without any preoccupation with other agenda issues.

Where should you do it?

Can you possibly get away for an overnight retreat somewhere? That would be by far the best environment for this discussion. Wherever you do it, it must be a private place that feels safe to everyone present to share anything without being distracted or overheard. This rules out coffee shops and restaurants, unless you have a private room, and public parts of homes where there will be family traffic.

What are some ground rules you can follow?

1. Talk about why you are doing this and encourage questions and concerns
2. Establish a covenant of confidentiality and talk about what that means
3. The leader of the group should go first in order to establish the depth of sharing and make it a safe place for the others to share. The key to making this impactful for the group is for you to share authentically, transparently, and even vulnerably.



4. Ideally, allow one hour per person for sharing, questions, and prayer. If you have less time, go with what you have, but try to allow as close to one hour as you can. The idea is to allow enough time that the one sharing feels free to go to a deep level.
5. Here is what you are sharing: your story, which includes the critical events, relationships, and patterns that most impacted you and contributed to who you are today. It should include, but not be limited to your “spiritual” journey with its ups and downs. One option is to utilize a graphical tool to help you tell the story, utilizing a line that goes from left to right across the page, going up when a positive event or pattern occurred and going down when something negative occurred.
6. It’s critical to share at a deep level, meaning two things. First of all, share what the real issues are, including the brokenness from the past and the present (and we are ALL broken somehow). Secondly, try to communicate how you experienced the critical events underneath or internally.
7. For those listening to the story, the key is to really listen. This is NOT a time to try to help the person fix any issues. But DO ask clarifying questions. Also, ask questions to help uncover the significance of the experiences; for example, “How do you think that impacted you, how did that change you, how does that impact you today, etc.”
8. You may want to pray for each person after his or her sharing time. I recommend laying hands on the person as you pray, to help create a real bond together.

What is “cover” and how do you do it?

When people share something sensitive or emotional, they are in a sense exposing themselves in several ways. “Was it safe to share that? What will they think of me now? Have I lost their respect? Should I be embarrassed? Should I have done that?” You can answer all of these questions in a positive way by “covering” (protecting, creating safety for, affirming) the person after they share. Here are some things you can say that will cover them. “Thank you for sharing in a vulnerable way. That’s exactly what we’re here to do. I admire your courage in sharing that.” You also will be covering them when it’s your turn to share, if you share as vulnerably as they do.

Another important part of cover is meeting the person at the same “level.” If they are at an emotional level or share an emotional experience, don’t respond merely from a rational level. Try to meet them where they are. For instance, try to tell them how their story makes you FEEL by expressing a true emotion.

Some examples of positive emotions you may want to respond with are: amazed, sympathetic, interested, satisfied, blessed, touched, joyous, thankful, surprised, honored, fortunate, encouraged, excited, inspired, challenged, awed, and honored. Or the story might raise negative emotions in you, such as: sad, frustrated, angry (not at this person, but the situation, life, or someone else), disillusioned, heartbroken, wronged, lonely, powerless, or afraid.



When you meet a person where they are, your hearts will touch in a special way, and you will both experience a new connection. The person will feel understood and affirmed as a person.

(Remember that this is not the time to try to “fix” people or their issues. However, if you do sense recurring lies that they are listening to, feel free to speak truth to them – as a part of the cover. Do not give advice at this time)

What should change with your group after this?

Hopefully, your relationships will go to a new level. The new level of revealing and knowing will provide opportunity to accept and feel accepted, care and be cared about, love and be loved, and trust and be trusted. In this new climate, you can all learn to express yourselves in safety, have conflict in a healthy way that brings out all thoughts and opinions, be fully committed to the team and its decisions, hold each other accountable to follow-through, and attend to results.

Also, the new climate of love and vulnerability can bring about the possibility of spiritual growth in everyone.

How can you maintain and deepen this level of relationship afterwards?

This is a very important question. Now that you have gone to a new level, you definitely don't want to go back to business as usual. You have begun to establish relationship and true Christian community as the foundation for the team rather than merely working for results, whether those are results in spiritual growth or results in ministry work. So now you need to work at maintaining and deepening the relationships.

At a minimum, you should establish a habit of updating your stories regularly. If you are a working ministry team, board, etc. you can set aside the first hour of each meeting, for instance, to update each other on your lives at a transparent level and pray for each other. You still have to get work done, so it will be a temptation to shortcut this time to just a few minutes. However, try to change your paradigm in this way. Your ministry work will get done more effectively in less time if you continue to demonstrate that the relationships come first.

Here's a tangible example. A friend of mine is the Chairman of the Board of a missionary training organization called MTI. A few years ago they moved to a board model that mirrors all that we are taking about here. For years they had semi-annual board meetings with three days of business. Today they have a day and a half meeting, with the first half day dedicated to relationships and board member training. According to my friend, in one partial day from 10 AM to 4 PM they now do all of their business and are a much more effective board than they were before, which he attributes to the deep relationships they now have. Remember the relationship-trust-healthy conflict-commitment-accountability-results continuum.