

SEEKERS CHURCH



TEACHING IN THE SCHOOL FOR CHRISTIAN GROWTH

Learners & Teachers Mission Group
January 2021

1. Understanding the Seekers Church School for Christian Growth (SCG)

The SCG uses a relational model, which assumes that each participant brings some form of wisdom from his or her life experiences in connection with the subject to the class, and that each person will make discoveries about the subject. A relational model does not assume that the teacher is the sole or even primary repository of knowledge about the subject matter. There are a number of goals for the relational model:

- Each person should discover and value what he or she brings to a group understanding of the subject.
- Each person will engage in deep listening to each other, open to changing his/her mind and heart about the subject matter and other topics, and open to the process of being changed spiritually.
- Each person will develop insights about issues raised and will form a provisional understanding about the topic.
- Each participant will be willing to re-explore the subject at a later time.
- The class becomes a small incarnation of the Body of Christ.

The method for the relational model is some combination of:

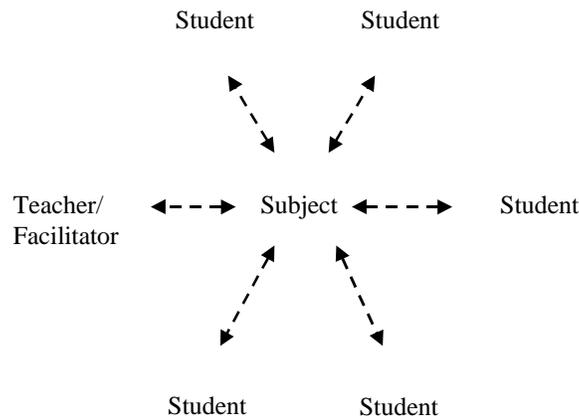
- reading of material assigned in class by the teacher,
- homework questions designed to encourage participants to engage with the material and elicit their contributions to the group,
- discussion in small groups on one or more aspects of the material to elicit each person's contribution and to build caring, trusting relationships among the class members, and
- group discussion and group exercises to identify common themes in response to the material, integrate responses, and build Christian community among the participants.

Because the teacher is not considered the primary repository of knowledge to be transmitted to the participant, the teacher's status is not higher than the participants. Instead, the locus of authority is the truth as discovered by the class. The teacher becomes more of a discussion facilitator and coach. (See figure 1.)

The teacher in an adult Christian education class conducted in the relational model may have little if any seminary training, but is skilled in working with small groups. While the subject matter may be one or more books of the Bible or a topic in church doctrine, it may also be an application of these into daily life, such as Christians' preparation for aging and death, or how one's faith is lived out with respect to the environment. The teacher prepares a set of questions about each aspect of the topic that will engage the participants with the topic, divides the questions into those that will be assigned for

homework and those that will be used in small group and class discussions, and selects appropriate reading assignments that shed light on the topic.

Figure 1
SCL Relational Model



2. Are You Ready to Teach in the SCG?

Because the goal of each SCG class includes building a sense of what it means to belong to an intentional Christian community along with exploring a topic, those interested in teaching in the SCG must be committed to promoting healthy group life in addition to individual discipleship. SCG teachers should be alert to issues in Seekers Church and the Church around the world that are potentially divisive, and have a commitment to working through conflict. Teaching in the SCG is therefore perhaps more difficult than offering a class in other settings. It is not enough to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the subject matter, although this is certainly required. Because the relational model is different than the usual didactic model, additional preparation is needed.

Those interested in teaching in the SCG should have taken several classes using a relational model (preferably in the SCG) so that they are familiar with its style and class expectations. They should truly believe that they do not have a monopoly on the knowledge about the subject that they want to teach. They should be eager to create an atmosphere where all contributions of each person in the class are welcomed and valued, and to create a climate of trust where everyone feels comfortable in sharing his or her spiritual journey.

Those interested in teaching in the SCG must be committed to assisting each participant in the process of spiritual formation. This means that they are committed to grow and change themselves as the Holy Spirit works within them and through the class. They must be willing to listen for the Spirit in their initial and weekly preparations, during each class, and during weekly follow-up. They must be willing to adapt material and to change their methods to those that work more effectively.

Above all, the teacher needs to prepare themselves spiritually for the class. The teacher needs sufficient spiritual maturity so that they do not expect the class to solve their spiritual issues with respect to the subject matter, especially with its most challenging aspects. The teacher must be prepared to model the level of vulnerability wanted from the participants by doing the homework and sharing it aloud in the small group discussion or larger group discussion. Such modeling invites community and trust, sending a message that "You can go there and come back without losing yourself." As a result, the teacher must have done their own "spiritual homework" with respect to the topic. A teacher who has not processed difficult material in their heart and soul may be anxious. Tearful anxiety will frighten participants so that they are less willing to share their vulnerability; tearful confidence will indicate that the topic is tender but has a safe place.

If you are interested in teaching but have never taught in the SCG before, we encourage you to contact the Learners and Teachers (L&T) Mission Group to let them know of your interest. L&T may offer a more experienced person to help you create the class and to team-teach with you in an informal mentoring process. L&T will provide a shepherd during your class for you to consult with, to pray for the class, and to contact people who are absent to ensure that they catch up on the class's discussion and the homework.

3. What Subjects Are Suitable for Classes?

L&T is committed to offering "core classes" that are fundamental to equipping people on their spiritual journey: the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), New Testament, Christian Doctrine/Teachings, and Christian Growth. In addition, L&T frequently offers classes in Christian community, contemplative prayer and silence, keeping a journal, call and mission, spiritual issues in money and wealth, using the arts in spiritual growth, and other topics it discerns are relevant to the members of Seekers Church. Those interested in exploring a new mission might sponsor a class to disseminate information about the call of the mission and gather potential mission group members.

L&T believes that each person has some area of knowledge about his or her Christian journey that he or she cares passionately about and would like to get others interested in. For some people that is scripture, for others it is prayer and contemplation, for still others it is action to address social injustice, for others it is using the fine arts or performing arts and body movement, and so on. We encourage you to discuss potential topics with L&T.

4. When Are Classes Held?

Generally, L&T offers two six-week sessions in both fall and spring terms. Classes are preceded by a prepared meal and a short meditation. For those in the process of becoming a Steward L&T will provide the four core classes within a two-year period. Occasionally classes are offered for four or twelve weeks instead. L&T has found that a minimum of six weeks is needed to promote a sense of Christian community effectively.

Between the fall and spring semesters L&T offers short classes of one, two, or three weeks without a prepared dinner. During the summer L&T may offer a mixture of two- to four-week classes and single-session discussion groups to accommodate travel and maintain the "habit" of participating in the SCG. These classes are not designed to create a deep sense of Christian community, although such an experience may happen.

L&T plans its cycle of classes several times during the year. You should consider the topic, your experience in teaching in the relational model, and other commitments in your life when discussing your proposed class with a member of L&T.

5. Preparing to Teach a Class at the SCG

a. **Shape and prune the content.** Do the study necessary to have a firm grasp of the subject material but don't be too ambitious in terms of how much you will be able to cover. You will rarely have enough time to exhaust the subject matter fully. Think of the questions your participants might be asking about the topic; these may vary depending on age, life experiences, and spiritual maturity. Such questions can typically introduce the critical themes you want to emphasize. Then, trust the SCG experience: your participants will usually take other classes to pursue the topic from a different aspect or may even repeat the class in a few years.

b. **Consider how to present the topic.** Remember that your task is to present the topic in such a way that the participants' LIVES will be engaged. Some people learn best through individual and group nonverbal exercises, so consider a range of methods to promote their engagement with the topic. For example, include exercises that require people to draw or sculpt or make collages or use music or use body movement.

c. **Identify questions to energize participants' participation.** Choose questions that might work well in small group discussions, which can be another way to give more people a chance to make connections between the content and their lives. Frame questions for small group and large group discussions so that they are open-ended questions that deepen their engagement with the topic as they share from their individual spiritual work on the topic. Good questions and exercises for the class:

- Are simple and direct
- Cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no"
- Ask "how" rather than "why"
- Invite participants to engage more deeply into the reading or the topic
- Invite participants to respond with honesty and vulnerability
- Can be responded to differently by different people
- Can be responded to differently at different stages in life
- Can be responded to non-verbally

d. **Plan homework.** Much of the learning in an SCG class occurs outside the class gathering as each participant engages with the topic. The gathered class is the "bait" that serves as an excellent place for the participants' individual learning to be integrated into their spiritual journeys as they hear each other's response to the topic. You therefore need to spend a considerable amount of time in selecting a reading assignment and preparing questions for responses that will be bridge between one class and the next. Make sure your homework instructions allow the participant room for creativity, but create limits. For example, you can use the phrase "Write a paragraph in response to..." or you can say "Create a response to..." which allows the participant to draw, or create a collage, or to bring music, and explain orally. Be sure to limit the effort -- one paragraph or one page or one drawing, etc.

e. **Prepare teaching aids.** If you will be using a flip chart or whiteboard, practice your diagrams. Make sure your handwriting is legible and visible across the room. If you are going to use handouts, have them photocopied well in advance of class and always make one or two more than the number of participants.

f. **Understand the rhythm of an SCG class.** Typically, in the first few weeks the class energy focuses on getting to know each other more deeply and building trust. A common class "history" is built as participants share their responses to the homework. In the next few weeks, participants are stretched spiritually as the material and other participants' responses to it challenge comfortable ways in which participants have related to the topic in the past. The newly built trusting relationships may be challenged as the Spirit does its work. In the last few weeks the participants integrate the topic into their spiritual life and prepare to integrate their experience of Christian community into their spiritual journey.

g. **Do your own spiritual homework with respect to the topic.** Be prepared to model the level of vulnerability that is desired from the participants. Meet with the shepherd assigned by the L&T to go over the class design, known special needs of participants, and roles.

6. Preparing the Room for the Class

Different seating arrangements send different messages. A circle of chairs, whether or not around a table, reinforces the concept that everyone has something to contribute, while classroom or theatre style seating reinforces the concept of hierarchy and usually leads to lectures by the teacher. The circle should include a place for an easel with newsprint and different colored markers. When participants' insights are written down, they reinforce and integrate themes.

Altars are ancient symbols of sanctuary, so an altar in the middle of the circle creates "safe holy space." This can be as simple as a cloth covering a small end table or coffee table, open Bible, and a candle. A symbol of something related to the particular night's topic can also reinforce the theme.

If possible, too bright or harsh lighting should be reduced, but the room should be bright enough for people to read (from their homework).

You may encourage one or more people to prepare the room each week as a means to build group cohesion.

7. Gathering the Class

a. **Every week.** Participants will need a short transition period, whether from their dinner or from their workday. When everyone appears to be present, light the candle and ring a small chime. Encourage everyone to sit quietly and take relaxed deep breaths. Begin with a short prayer that invokes God's presence.

b. **The first week:** The shepherd for the class may circulate a class list to collect addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses. Introduce yourself and why you are teaching the class. Go around the circle and ask each person to introduce themselves and why they are taking the class. Invite them to state their hopes, expectations, and fears. You may consider having each person select a prayer partner as another way to deepen community; if so, you may choose to encourage them to select someone they don't know well.

Explain how the class will operate. To the extent possible, respond to the significant hopes, expectations, and fears expressed by the participants. State your expectations for the class members, including their attendance, participation in discussion, and completion of assigned reading and homework questions. Introduce the topic and use open-ended questions to ascertain the participants' familiarity with the topic and their reaction to it.

c. **On subsequent weeks:** Have them spend five minutes with their prayer partner. Have a regular spot for people to pick up their homework on which you have written a response (see "10. Responding to Homework Assignments," below).

Begin the class with some discussion out of the homework assignment (which encourages them to do the homework). This may take the form of asking what particularly caught their attention in the reading assignment, or asking their response to the first question. Share your own response to the

homework, although you should neither be the first person nor the last person to do so. Sharing from the homework reestablishes the connection to the material and illustrates how people can respond differently to the same issue, depending on where they are on their spiritual path. If the class has an environment of acceptance, sensitive issues can be shared and heard respectfully, without an expectation that the class needs to treat them as problems to be solved.

Frequently the sharing is intensely self-revealing, and indicates unresolved issues. If a person displays intense emotions that threaten to disrupt the class, this should be addressed so that the person does not leave the class session in an emotionally fragile state, or regrets making themselves so vulnerable to the extent that they choose to drop out of the class. The teacher must exercise judgment as to whether to use class time to address the issue, to speak privately with the individual at the end of class, or whether to excuse the person from class and ask the shepherd to meet privately with the person to provide support. The shepherd should also encourage the person to discuss the issues with their spiritual director or a qualified therapist.

8. Suggested Class Structure

L&T has found that a class gathering typically divides its time into thirds. The combination of the gathering, prayer partner check-in, sharing from homework, and summing up the theme(s) from the homework should take about 30 minutes. This can be followed by about 30 minutes for input. Depending on the overarching class topic, input can be an activity with the study text (such as scripture), an experience (such as journaling, quilting, body movement, or clowning), or a guest speaker on outreach/mission. Avoid lecturing. This is a good time to use visual aids. This is followed by 20 minutes for integrating the input. Typically, the class subdivides into small groups to discuss a question posed by the teacher or do an exercise (which may be nonverbal) or application. Keep an eye on the time and make adjustments accordingly.

Be sure to save about 10 minutes at the end for making the homework assignment and allowing prayer-partners to meet after the whole group has ended. Have a ritual to end class each week. Typically, this includes having someone in the class give a closing prayer or benediction and snuffing out the candle.

9. During Class

Ensure that people listen respectfully and without interrupting. Encourage statements that begin with "I feel..." or "I see it..." or "I believe..." rather than statements that assume that there is only one viewpoint. While allowing disagreement, discourage any participant's attempts to convert another to their viewpoint. Suggest that such a participant try to discuss the topic from the other side.

Guide the discussion. Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate. While some will need no encouragement, others may need more time to process information or to feel that the atmosphere is safe enough to risk vulnerability. Do not allow one or two people to use up all the time or otherwise dominate the discussion. Be selective about what you write down on newsprint to keep things focused. If a comment appears to take the discussion way off track, write down only the part

that is closest to the main theme. When a comment differs only slightly from a previous one, merely underline or check the first comment.

If significant conflict occurs, interrupt politely and acknowledge it, and suggest that the class can hold such differences safely without resolving them immediately. Remember that an important part of the class is to model how the Body of Christ lives together. Since conflict is a part of that life, modeling a healthy way to address conflict is an important learning.

If a person has a so strong an emotional reaction to something that is said that they leave the class, excuse the shepherd and allow them to assist the person.

10. Responding to Homework Assignments

If you have framed the homework assignment correctly and encouraged a safe atmosphere in class, the participants will respond to the assignment with seriousness, sincerity, and vulnerability. Consider yourself akin to a temporary spiritual director for the participants. Review their responses with an equal amount of seriousness and sincerity. Take time to reflect over their response. Underline or circle significant items. Make short comments in the margins to encourage them to continue to engage with the topic. You may find that asking a relevant question will be most appropriate. Especially during the first few weeks, thank them in a note at the bottom for their honesty and effort.

If a participant is consistently not doing the homework assignment, ask the shepherd to discuss this with the participant. Consider the feedback -- you may need to change the amount of the homework, clarify your instructions, or improve the atmosphere in which homework is discussed orally.

11. Evaluation.

During or after the final class, the shepherd will distribute or e-mail a "Final Evaluation" form to the participants for them to complete and return. Their responses help L&T guide the School.

12. Ten Things to Avoid

1. Having too much content or too tight an agenda
2. Lecturing too much
3. Coming unprepared
4. Springing topics on people without a connection to previous topics
5. Asking questions that encourage "Yes/No" responses
6. Rushing the period of sharing so that people feel objectified
7. Allowing the class to drift
8. Allowing someone to hog the discussion
9. Telling people they are wrong
10. Putting people down or ridiculing them

APPENDIX

Teaching in the SCG Using Videoconferencing

Sometimes it may not be possible to conduct the class in the SCG with everyone face to face due to inclement weather, an epidemic, or some other reason. L&T has had success using videoconferencing, in which the teacher and participants are connected by cameras and microphones on their computers or cell phones.

1. Before the first class:

- The L&T registrar should limit the size of the class so that all participants, including the teacher(s) and shepherd, will fit onto one display screen of the videoconference application.
- L&T will designate a videoconference host (VCH) who is familiar with the videoconferencing program. The VCH will manage the technical aspects of the videoconferencing application, allowing the teacher to concentrate on content. Usually, the shepherd will be the VCH, but occasionally a teacher who is experienced in conducting a videoconference will be the VCH.
- The VCH should schedule the time to begin the videoconference by about five minutes before the official class starting time. The VCH should schedule the time to end the videoconference about five minutes after the class' ending time.
- The teacher should send all materials to be displayed on the shared video screen during the class to the VCH before the class so that the VCH will be familiar with them and the cue(s) to display them can be agreed upon.
- The teacher should inform the VCH as to the number and size of any breakout groups and how long they will last so that the VCH may implement this at the appropriate time.
- The VCH should send an email with the link to the videoconference to the class participants several days before the class and again on the day of the class. The link should specify the day and time to link to the class by computer and by cell phone.

2. At the beginning of the first class:

- The VCH should provide a phone number for participants to call if their link to the videoconference is disconnected and cannot be reestablished.
- The teacher or VCH should inform the participants how they should signal that they wish to say or ask something, either by waving a hand in front of their face or by using an icon with the videoconferencing application.
- The teacher or VCH should inform the participants whether the participants may or may not use the "chat" or "message" function during the class. If it will not be used the VCH should disable the "chat" or "message" function during the class.

3. During the class:

- The VCH should monitor the screen for those who have signaled that they wish to say or ask something, and should announce aloud who may speak and who will be next to speak.
- The VCH should display material on the shared screen as indicated by the teacher.
- When it is time for breakout groups the VCH should inform the class of how long the breakout groups will last and then divide the class into groups as previously set by the teacher.
- If the audio of the videoconference creates noticeable feedback (frequently due to the size of the class), the VCH should ask the participants to mute the microphones on their computers or cell phones unless they have been invited to speak.

4. After each week's class:

- The VCH should send the shared screen material to the participants by email, along with the next homework assignment.
- The VCH should send an email with the link to the videoconference to the class participants several days before the class and again on the day of the class. The link should specify the day and time to link to the class by computer and by cell phone.

5. Final class:

- The VCH should e-mail a "Final Evaluation" form to the participants for them to complete and return. Their responses help L&T guide the School.