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CALLED TO INFLUENCE

Faith-Filled Friendships

How to share your
spiritual journeys with
friends.



Faith-Filled Friendships

How to share your spiritual journeys with friends.



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Introduction

Friends for Eternity

By Caryn Rivadeneira



Betty and I have been best friends since sixth grade—specifically since the day her mom sent her to school with surgical gloves. We were dissecting squid that day and when it came to choosing dissection partners, I knew the girl with the latex gloves was the one for me. We shared some good laughs during that gruesome science project and have been sharing experiences ever since. We've shopped and road tripped together; we've survived crazy college years and a CNN-worthy earthquake. We've stood up in each others' weddings and attended each others' babies' baptisms.



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But when I look back on our two decades of friendship, it's some recent sharing we've done that I cherish the most. A few years ago, we discovered that God's been hard at work in both our lives regarding materialism and our lack of contentment. While each of us has had our own roads to travel to get us more in line with God's view of these, we discovered in each other wonderful accountability partners and friends who can understand our struggles (that to others might seem so silly) in ways that no one else could.

While I do believe God gives us friends for many reasons—including simply to have fun with them—one of the greatest experiences friends can enjoy together is helping each other grow in their faith and become more Christ-like. But oftentimes this is easier said than done. That's why we put together this resource. It offers many ways we can cultivate friendships that deepen our spiritual journey and bring us closer to God.

May God bless you and your friends,

Caryn Rivadeneira

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Faith-Filled Friendships" for a group study



"Faith-Filled Friendships" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the "Reflect" questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**



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You've Got Prayer



Why staying close to my friend and God is only a click away.

By Constance Fink

It was a season of great burden with no sign of relief: Our family was in the thick of stress due to unexpected unemployment, and living where we did—in a rural area—made it even more difficult to find work. As the weeks turned to months, the financial, emotional, and spiritual strain felt unbearable at times.





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Our friends called to offer us support. Some of them expressed concern. Others attempted to "fix" our situation, but ultimately realized how helpless they were to do so. Often by the end of our conversations, I felt an unshakable aloneness, even though I was trusting God as never before. What was missing?

One day, while driving alone, I blurted out, "I wish I had a prayer partner!" It was as if a light went on: That's exactly what I was missing—someone to pray with me regularly. Jesus promised, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). I needed his presence now as never before.

Still driving, I wondered which of my friends could be my prayer partner. Though caring, all of them were busy. And since I live in a rural area, it was unrealistic to think of getting together every day. But every day was what I needed!

Then a new option dawned on me: *Why limit my choice to local friends? Why not ask one of my out-of-state friends? We already communicated regularly by e-mail; why not pray together online? I could share needs as they occurred, and my friend could pray at her convenience.*

I had just the friend in mind. Linda, my former roommate at Moody Bible Institute, is now a pastor's wife in Pennsylvania. We still recall our heart-wrenching good-bye in the college parking lot. But deep inside, past the tears, we sensed our friendship wasn't over that day. Although it's been more than 25 years since we shared a room, we're closer today than we ever imagined we could be.





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Through the years, e-mail has been a significant factor in keeping us close. We write often, sharing news and struggles, dreams and disappointments. Through her words, I see her smile and sometimes her fatigue. Because our personalities and gifts are complementary, neither of us proceeds too far on a project without bouncing ideas off the other, whether it's one of my writing projects or a retreat idea for her church.

The Great Experiment

I arrived home, immediately logged on to my computer, and composed an e-mail asking Linda to be my e-prayer partner for at least a month. As I clicked "send," my heart filled with anticipation for what daily prayer could do for my current situation.

The next day I received Linda's reply: "Yes, I'll pray with you. Your message was timely. I've been thinking about you and how much I need you." *Wow, this isn't just for me. It's for Linda, too.* As a pastor's wife, she needed a confidante outside her church for prayer and accountability. Then, to show her readiness, she sent the first prayer.

We began to send daily e-mails, just one- or two-sentence prayers. From sign-on to sign-off, it took less than 15 minutes. We prayed for specifics—"Please give wisdom in the decision next week." We prayed Scripture—"God, please guard her heart and mind with your peace." We were honest with God—"I'm discouraged today, Lord, and don't know how much longer I can go on." We questioned—"Sometimes you seem far away, Lord." We praised—"Thank you, God, for the reminder that you keep your promises." We spoke to God from our hearts, and kept each other's concerns confidential.





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Though my circumstances remained unchanged, it wasn't long before my burden began to feel lighter. Instead of turmoil, I now felt comfort and peace. My prayers began to reflect quiet rest in God's presence rather than preoccupation with my concerns.

Still, there were days when the needs were so numerous and my focus so scattered, it was difficult to pray. I couldn't seem to find the words. Those days, Linda became my voice. Her prayers for me were a tangible example of the Holy Spirit's intercession on my behalf (Romans 8:16–27).

God used that initial month of daily e-mails to quiet my heart in the midst of turmoil. I began to recognize that walking with God in the middle of the woods is more vital than finding a way out. With him, we find stability, rest, and hope, no matter what path we're on.

Not only did I draw closer to God, but also to Linda. After the first month, it was natural to continue our prayer partnership. After the first year, God was working in so many of our requests we were excited to continue. We're now beginning our fourth year.

Bonding and Blessings

An e-prayer partnership grows a friendship despite busy schedules and geographic distance. Here's how it can bless your relationship with your friend—and with God:

Closeness. Several years pass between visits, but Linda and I are involved in each other's daily life. Even though our prayers are only a few sentences long, they hold





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pertinent concerns. Today's concerns. While I prepare dinner, I pray for the neighbors Linda invited to her house tonight. And tomorrow morning, I'll log on to see how it went.

Focus. Just as journaling a prayer provides clarity, so does composing an e-prayer. Written words help crystallize what we need from God: "Lord, you've always taken care of my needs. I ask for peace as I trust you to guide us in paying for this unexpected bill."

Writing out prayers—and God's responses—is also a good way to record his individual attention. Not only can we see a pattern of God's work in our life, but the entries also serve as reminders that our requests are with God. He holds them in his hand. How often we need that reminder!

At the beginning of each year, Linda and I send each other a list of the areas in our lives that need fine-tuning. Throughout the year, we save copies of our prayers as a record of how God worked. It's as easy as cutting and pasting from the e-mail message to a file in a word-processing program. By the end of the year, the electronic compilation is a clear testimony to God's faithfulness.

Accountability. The commitment to pray together builds accountability. As we remind each other of areas for growth and change through e-mail or instant messenger, we can make immediate course corrections. For example, one of my goals last year was to show grace to a friend with whom I had frequent conflicts. When a new conflict





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arose, I expressed my frustration both to God and Linda. Linda reminded me the conflict was an opportunity for God to help me grow and for him to be reflected through me. The next time I had an encounter with my difficult friend, instead of reacting, I paused, knowing I was upheld by Linda's prayer earlier in the week, "Please give Connie patience and love beyond her own." Immediacy. E-mail provides immediate access, an opportunity for instant pleas. I often think of the missionaries 100 years ago and their urgent prayer requests in the midst of serious hardships. Their requests, sent by boat across the seas, sometimes took months to reach their faithful supporters. Today when my friends share requests, not only do I reply immediately with a word of encouragement but also with a prayer.

Prayer Unplugged

Praying by e-mail is one way to stay connected to an out-of-town friend. But what if the Internet isn't available? Consider what another friend and I did before either of us had e-mail. Carole worked at home in Texas; I worked in an office in Illinois 1,100 miles away. We mailed each other a list of our prayer concerns. At 10:00 every Tuesday morning, I dialed her phone number and let it ring once to signal I was available to pray. Then we each took a 15-minute break alone in a private place. Separately, we joined together before God's throne. Each Tuesday morning the miles between us disappeared as we prayed for our concerns at the same time. Though we weren't together in person, Jesus kept his promise to be present when two or three gather in his name.





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With both Linda and Carole, I've shared the joy of many answered prayers. Needs have been met, rough places smoothed, relationships healed, circumstances changed, and faith strengthened. When the answers came, my prayer partner was the first to know. In the meantime, the load was lightened and the waiting was easier.

Constance Fink lives in Illinois. This article first appeared in the July/August 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *In what ways have you experienced shared prayer deepen a friendship—and your faith?*
- *Constance writes that not only does writing out prayers help focus our prayer, but the e-mail entries "serve as reminders that our requests are with God." How might this help you strengthen your faith?*



Girlfriends Unlimited!



Check out this unique group two Arizona women formed to foster tailor-made good times.

By Corrie Cutrer

On any given Saturday this fall, you're likely to find an energetic group of women hiking on a beautiful desert trail through Arizona's Superstition Mountains. Or discussing an intriguing book at Starbucks in nearby Phoenix as they sip their lattés. Or touring a museum together, sewing quilts, watching movies, or playing a serious game of Cranium.



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All these activities are arranged through an innovative women's ministry called Girlfriends Unlimited!—an Arizona organization that's changing the way one church is connecting women and encouraging them in their faith.

Groups such as the Cuisine Queens, who visit gourmet restaurants together, or the Sassy Scrappers, who meet regularly to chat while putting photos in their scrapbooks, are the creation of two suburban Phoenix women who three years ago were determined to come up with a nonthreatening way to help women make friends and grow spiritually. "We live in a society where a lot of women go to work, drive home, pop in the garage, and call it quits for the day," says Girlfriends cofounder Patty Wyatt, 40, who worked 12 years for the airline industry before heading this new ministry. "Women need to connect with others. But most either have been hurt or disappointed with past friendships or are too busy with their families to think they have time for a girlfriend."

"And if they do attend a women's ministry event," adds the other founder, Lisa Jernigan, 45, "most women expect to sit and wait for a teacher to speak to them."

Lisa should know. She's the wife of the pastor at Central Christian Church of the East Valley in Mesa, Arizona, which now headquarters Girlfriends Unlimited! "We see it all the time—it's the 'I'm going to church and you're going to entertain me' mentality," Lisa says. "We wanted to get away from that and come up with events where women could interact with each other, feel safe, relax, and connect."





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A Vision Is Born

The vision for such events surfaced after Patty and Lisa met and discovered they'd both recently lost their mothers. Lisa's mom died from a rare form of liver cancer in 1998. Then, in the spring of 2000, Patty underwent a tragic loss after her 69-year-old mother, Nila Lynn, was murdered in broad daylight at a mass shooting that occurred in Peoria, Arizona, on the afternoon of April 19.

Convicted murderer Richard Glassel entered a homeowners association meeting of 35 people where Patty's parents were in attendance. Glassel, a disgruntled former member of the association, burst into the meeting and shot five people before he could be stopped.

Two of these victims were killed, including Patty's mom. It was a horrific ordeal for Patty and her family to endure. Along with the media attention they received, the family also had to watch a lengthy trial unfold. Closure finally came in February 2003, when Glassel was sentenced to death.

Yet amid her suffering, Patty says God was at work, using her mother's death as a moment of vision in her life.

"Right after she died, all my friends supported us," Patty says. "They delivered meals. And they prayed constantly for us. People would tell me they'd gotten up at 2 or 3 A.M. to pray for me."

Patty also was amazed with how many women mourned her mom's death. "There were 1,800 people at my mother's funeral," Patty says. "It was obvious she'd built a





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community of friends she loved and who loved her. It made me think, I want the work I'm doing to leave a rich legacy of friendship like the one my mom left."

Shortly after her mother's death, Patty's pastor at Central Christian Church asked her to share her testimony in a service. Lisa, the pastor's wife, was touched by Patty's faith and their similar circumstances. While grieving her own mother's death, Lisa also had been upheld by loving and supportive women.

Lisa and Patty eventually set up a date to have lunch and discovered they shared the desire to help other women experience the kind of close relationships that had been so evident in their lives and in the lives of their mothers.

"We wanted other women to have the same support we were offered in tragic situations," Patty says. "And we wanted to figure out a way to offer it to churchgoers and nonchurchgoers alike."

To draw in women who would be uncomfortable attending a typical Bible study, Patty and Lisa started to brainstorm a hands-on event they hoped would appeal to a wide range of women. They decided to simply call it a "Girlfriend Night." In November 2000, they transformed a room at their church into a comfy atmosphere complete with couches, lamps, candles, and a beautiful buffet dinner. They set up different stations where women could get a manicure, have a massage, play games, work on a scrapbook, or create a craft, such as painting pottery or making a wreath or a bracelet. To cover the costs, women bought tickets for \$10 and then paid extra if they wanted to complete a craft.





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Patty and Lisa opened the inaugural Girlfriends Unlimited! event with a short devotion, then told the 150 women, who ranged in age from 20- to 70-something, that the rest of the evening was about them getting connected. Soon the group was playing games such as, "Who Wants to Be a Girlfriend?" where clusters of women were given ten minutes to become better acquainted before they had to answer questions such as, "Is your new friend's hair chemically altered?" or, "If you were lunching together, would your friend order a Caesar salad or chili?"

The games were great icebreakers—and by the end of that first evening, the participants had made new friends. When Patty and Lisa started cleaning up at 11:30 p.m., they discovered a small group of older women still huddled in a corner, determined to finish the 500-piece puzzle they'd started hours earlier.

Patty and Lisa learned these large-scale events were a great way to get women interested in other activities, such as the interest-based clubs they created called Girlfriend Groups, or the Bible studies held at their church. Such was the case with Janice Allen.

"Janice, a single parent, had just moved to Phoenix from Colorado and learned about Girlfriends Unlimited! while visiting our church one Sunday," Lisa says. "She bought a ticket for herself and her daughter to attend, but ended up finding out her daughter couldn't make it. Even though Janice was unsure about coming alone, she still showed up. We welcomed her and introduced her to several other women. We also told her about a Bible study that meets on





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Monday nights. Janice started going to that study, and it became her family. Now she helps to lead Patterns of Grace, the quilting group that's one of the smaller interest-based clubs."

Plugging In

Patty and Lisa say there are dozens of women like Janice who've joined a Bible study or an interest-based group by first attending the large-scale Girlfriends Unlimited! nights scheduled four times a year at the church. These big events usually are built around a surprise theme, such as the upcoming Western-style October event, "Boot Scootin' Girlfriends," which will feature root-beer floats, line dancing, hayrides, and a contest to see who can make the best chili.

After Patty and Lisa launched their first wide-scale event three years ago, they also kicked off their smaller Girlfriend Groups to help connect women based on their hobbies and interests. In all, 13 clubs exist for women to join—ranging from the Garage Sale Chicks, who gather on Saturday mornings to scour neighborhood bargains, to the Green Thumbs, who tour local gardens and help each other enhance their backyards with new landscaping ideas.

Sherry Booth, 43, who helps lead the Patterns of Grace quilters, says some of the clubs also are beginning to reach out to the community. For example, earlier this year Patterns of Grace created quilts that contained photos of soldiers sewn into the fabric for military families. This fall, they're planning to make quilts for abused children to be distributed by the organization Arizona Blankets for Kids.





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Additional groups also are forming, including one called Good Grief, which will reach out to women struggling with some kind of loss. "With everything going on in the world now, more women than ever are afraid, isolated, and lonely," Lisa says. "We want this new group to meet those women's emotional needs."

Ultimately, the goal of all these groups is to build a community of friendship and support for women. "And most importantly, to get them to have a relationship with Christ," Patty adds.

The opportunity for outreach to non-Christians was heightened last March after a local television station ran a live segment on Girlfriends Unlimited! that showed viewers the types of activities the ministry offers. Since then, a growing number of participants from across Phoenix who likely never would have visited a church have attended the quarterly Girlfriends Unlimited! events.

As Patty and Lisa's concept for connecting women is catching on, they're receiving invitations to speak and lead similar girlfriend gatherings at venues across the country. They're also planning to write a book about how other congregations can build the same kind of innovative ministry they've initiated in Mesa.

"Our passion is to help women feel good about their friendships and who they are in Christ," Lisa says. "We tried to think of events that would cause us to drop everything and attend—and those ideas are resonating with other women."





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Adds Patty, "It's been exciting to watch this evolve. It's shown us that God really does use ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things."

Corrie Cutrer is a freelance writer. This article first appeared in the September/October 2003 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *In what ways have shared interests helped you experience spiritually deeper friendships?*
- *How might something like this help you reach out to your non-believing friends?*



Send the Word



How sharing Scripture can help your friends through dark days.

By Anna Edwards

When my mother passed away, I received many sympathy cards. Some folks simply signed their name; others jotted a few words of encouragement. But the cards that included a Bible verse the sender had selected just for me comforted me the most. As I read each Scripture, I received a double blessing: a sense of the sender's love and the love of the Supreme Comforter.



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Send the Word

During that trying time, as friends used God's Word to minister to me, I began to realize the healing effect Scripture has when applied to a hurting heart. Nothing short of God's Word can bring peace to the ravaged soul and calm to the frazzled heart. Where mortal words can't touch the hurt, God's all-powerful Word reaches and meets the heart's deepest need.

"A word spoken in due season, how good it is!" Proverbs 15:23 tells us. And Isaiah, foretelling of Jesus, wrote, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary" (50:4).

Anyone can "speak a word in season" by adding a Bible verse to a card or letter. Here are some things God's Word can accomplish.

Scripture Gives Confidence

"Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad" (Prov. 12:25). God's Word can lift us and provide confidence to carry on.

When my friend Julie was going through a divorce, we were separated by hundreds of miles. Because I couldn't sit and talk with her, I wrote her a letter of encouragement and included the verse: "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).





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I spoke with Julie many times after that, but she never mentioned my letter, and eventually I forgot about it. Three years later, we were able to meet for lunch and talk. As Julie was recounting the ups and downs of those difficult times, she said, "Anna, I've read the verse you sent me every day. There were many days when I don't think I'd have made it through if it hadn't been for that verse."

I sat in silence, awed by God's ongoing work in her life through a single verse in his Word. Up until then I'd felt ineffective in helping Julie, but now I realized that by sharing Scripture I'd given her the *one thing* that was able to boost her confidence and carry her through her dark days.

Scripture Releases Captives

Satan holds people captive to lies, but God's Word frees them. "For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

Phyllis, a coworker in her 40s, seemed too young to be seriously ill. Her doctor had previously diagnosed her condition as bronchitis, but then one day at work we heard the awful news: Phyllis had cancer.

Since Phyllis asked that only her closest friend, Sarah, visit her in the hospital, I decided to send her a card. I recalled Phyllis's telling me she only believed the words of Jesus, not the whole Bible. With that in mind, I wrote





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Jesus' words from Mark 10:27: "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

What I didn't know until after I mailed the card was that Phyllis didn't want anyone to know she had cancer. In fact, Phyllis wasn't facing her prognosis well. The cancer was terminal, but she was in a state of denial over her future. Whenever Sarah visited, Phyllis talked about everything except her illness.

When I finally heard the full story of what was going on, I thought *Oh, no. My card must have really upset her.* When Sarah visited the next day, Phyllis looked at her resolutely and said, "I got a card from Anna."

Sarah read it and cringed, but Phyllis reacted with a new openness. For the first time since her illness was diagnosed, she cried in front of Sarah. When her tears subsided, Phyllis began to speak freely about her cancer and her future. God's Word had crushed the fear and released her from denial.

Phyllis's condition quickly deteriorated and she lived only a few weeks after that incident. I don't know if she gave her life to Christ. But I do know God's Word was at work in her heart. Perhaps she accepted the cleansing power of His Word and found eternal rest.

Scripture Cheers the Weary

"My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to your word" (Ps. 119:25). When someone suffers or is down and out, all the counseling and positive thinking in the world can't lift her above her circumstances like God's Word can.





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My friend Betty lives in a nursing home. Despite her advanced age, Betty's still mentally sharp. When she experienced depression and a brief hospitalization, I gave her several Bible verses to encourage her. Unfortunately, Betty didn't respond to any of them. Then her grandson gave her a calendar for Christmas that featured a daily Bible verse. But instead of reading one verse a day, she read through it until she found a verse that spoke to her heart.

Several times after that when I visited, Betty proudly quoted Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

"I think that verse was written just for me," she exclaimed. I think she's right. That's another amazing thing about Scripture. It often seems to speak to us personally in our specific circumstances.

We all know people who are hurting. Some need comfort or release from fear, while others need confidence to face difficulties. Do you want to give someone a double blessing? The next time you hear of someone in need, prayerfully select an appropriate Scripture and include it in the card or letter you send. The friend will love hearing from you, and God's Word may be just what she needs to read.

Anna Edwards, a freelance writer, lives in Maryland. This article first appeared in the October/November 1999 issue of VIRTUE.





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Send the Word

Reflect

- *How has your life been impacted by Scripture shared by or with a friend?*
- *Which friends do you have right now who need to hear the powerful Word of God? Which verse might you want to share?*



Sweet Monday



Check out this recipe for no-fuss, all-fun female gatherings.

By Camerin Courtney

If you could see the scores of women chatting and munching on yummy desserts on Monday nights in Kim Newlen's Richmond, Virginia, family room—wearing funny hats, bidding in a "clutter auction," or mugging in an impromptu fashion show—you'd never believe this gentle southern woman ever was desperately lonely. But seven years ago, when Kim, now 45, left her teaching job to stay home with her then two-year-old daughter, Kali, Kim was home all day *every* day. And for the first time in her life, she experienced loneliness.



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"I asked my husband, Mark, if he thought there was something wrong with me because my best friend was our 72-year-old neighbor across the street," says Kim. "As a Christian, I know God loves me, but I couldn't understand why I had these deep feelings of loneliness."

Kim thought about inviting people over, but the effort involved in entertaining seemed daunting, especially with a toddler at home. "I was raised in South Carolina, where you prepare a five-course meal when you entertain," Kim explains. "In the past, I'd work myself to the bone cooking and cleaning to get ready for company. Right before my guests arrived, I'd wish they weren't coming. I hated feeling that way, and I knew it didn't please God either."

Driven by her need for friendship, Kim decided to scale back on her concept of "entertaining." She dreamed up a monthly gathering for women to munch and mingle that didn't require an RSVP or the need to extend a reciprocal invite. Her proposed gettogether would provide women with time for brief spiritual encouragement and the opportunity to learn from each other. But simplicity, she knew, was key to making this work.

Kim looked at her family's schedule and decided the first Monday of each month throughout the school year worked well. She figured it wouldn't take too much work or break her family's budget to make one dessert a month and invite some women over to enjoy it. Kim decided to call this new, no-fuss monthly gathering "Sweet Monday."

Kim whipped up a simple invitation and passed it out to all her neighbors—many of whom she didn't know well.





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Then she stood in front of her small, growing church that Sunday and invited all the women to attend. While outwardly she was enthusiastic, inside she was a nervous wreck. "The night before my first Sweet Monday gathering, I dreamed I was sitting on my front porch waiting with my dessert ready, and nobody came," Kim admits.

But the next night her dream proved untrue: Thirty women packed into Kim's kitchen and family room to chat and snack their way through the inaugural Sweet Monday. That night Kim couldn't sleep for a whole different reason: She was so jazzed from the buzz of activity in her home, the new friendships she was developing, and the obvious blessing from God.

Seven years of monthly Sweet Mondays later, Kim still has a difficult time falling asleep on the first Monday of the month.

Monday Night Ministry

On that first Sweet Monday, called a "Beauty-Full Evening," Kim asked all the women to share their favorite beauty tip (and offered a "sweet" tie-in by passing around Brach Peppermint Kisses). She was pleasantly surprised to see most of the women taking notes throughout the evening and talking excitedly about the tips they were learning from one another. "Another thing I missed as an at-home mom was learning from other women," Kim says. And the diversity of women at the Sweet Monday gatherings allows for great interaction and sharing.





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At her most recent Sweet Monday get-together, Kim says the ages ranged from early 20s to 76. Often single working women sit in Kim's family room next to stay-at-home moms. And those who may never have darkened the door of a church find themselves sharing tea and beauty tips with women who've taught Sunday school for decades. The common thread, Kim says, is the need for meaningful relationships that are hard to come by in our increasingly isolated society. "Our lives are so busy! Sweet Monday gives us a place to connect every month with people we normally wouldn't see because of work schedules and family activities," says Kim. "My life has been so much richer because of gathering with these women."

Kim's been delighted to see women take the initiative to invite new people to come to Sweet Monday. Her sign-in book's had newcomers' names in it every month except one in the seven years Sweet Monday has been meeting in her home. "When a woman meets someone new, she probably won't ask her to go to church with her the following Sunday, but she's much more likely to invite her to come into a home," Kim explains. This mixture of Christians and non-Christians in attendance has given Kim a unique opportunity to share her faith.

"Every Sweet Monday I share something from the Bible," says Kim. For example, before launching into the beauty secrets that first night, Kim read Proverbs 31:30—"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised"—and shared a few thoughts about true beauty. "I want to leave these women with something that really matters. And Isaiah 55:11 says God's Word never





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Sweet Monday

returns empty. While Sweet Monday is different than any sort of Bible study or prayer meeting, Christ is definitely here."

This is quite a stretch for a woman who says she used to be afraid even to say God's name around others. "But I realized we're living in a hard, hurting world. And I believe God's called me to bring some of the softer, sweeter things to the world through Sweet Monday," says Kim. "That's biblical. God tells us in Hebrews 10:24 to spur one another on to love and good deeds, and we certainly try to do that. Sweet Monday is just a creative tool for living out these biblical principles."

Kim's neighbor Linda invites her coworkers to Sweet Monday all the time. One of those women, who hadn't been going to church in years, started attending Kim and Linda's church after her first visit to Sweet Monday. She's now in a small group Bible study and soon will be going on a mission trip. "All it took was Linda inviting her!" says Kim.

Likewise, when Kim met a woman at the post office about six months ago, she invited her to Sweet Monday. The woman showed up at the next one, and, surprisingly, responded to Kim's usual invitation to all the women to talk with her if they have any spiritual questions. The woman asked Kim to call her, which eventually led them to have lunch at Kim's house one afternoon. Over grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, Kim led this woman to Christ.





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Candy and Creativity

On a typical Sweet Monday, women arrive at 7:30 p.m. and head straight for the kitchen, where they get some dessert, decaf coffee, and the best of all- gab time. At 8:00, Kim rings a bell and herds the crowd into her family room. After recognizing the newcomers and reminding everyone about the next Sweet Monday gathering, she sometimes throws out a getting-to-know-you question such as, "What are you most thankful for today?" or "What's your passion?" Other times she launches straight into her short devotional time, during which she reads Scripture and shares a few thoughts. After that comes the evening's program, which can be anything from a proper English tea party to a clutter auction (during which women bid with play money on someone else's "clutter"). The spirited gathering ends promptly at 9:00 p.m.

For "Mug and Muffin" night, women were encouraged to bring their own coffee mug (and a few extras for newcomers), then share their mug's significance and vote for the funniest, flashiest, or most feminine mug. The candy tie-in for this wintertime gathering is Brach Wintergreen Starlights. For "Hair-dos and Hairdoozies" night, Kim asked a former stylist to give her neighbor a makeover while "talking hair" for 20 minutes. Several women shared their own "hair-doozies" stories while they all snacked on Shock Tarts. When Kim discovered a woman in her church decorates cakes, she planned a Sweet Monday called "Piece of Cake," during which the woman shared how to make a Super Bowl football cake and a heart cake without buying any special cake pans. The "Piece of Cake" sweet? Reese's Pieces, of course.





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Kim says ideas for Sweet Monday themes come to her all the time. Some are suggested by friends and Sweet Monday attendees, and her favorites are inspired by noticing other women's passions—such as the cake decorator at her church. "Not every woman is going to be a Sunday school teacher. But there are so many women who are passionate about cooking for their family or making a beautiful cake," says Kim. "Many times I try to write a Sweet Monday based on one specific woman's talents. I love to see these women shine when they share their passions and gifts. And I learn so much from them."

Passing It On

Kim's husband, Mark, who usually spends Sweet Mondays in his study after putting their daughter, Kali, to bed, was so amazed at the ministry happening in their home that first year, he encouraged Kim to write a book of all her ideas. "'Other women can do this, too,' he told me. 'Get your ideas down,'" says Kim. "He kept nudging me to do it, but when he finally said, 'If you put the ideas down, I'll go make 50 copies,' I knew I had to because he doesn't like to spend money!"

A neighbor offered to type up all of Kim's hand-written Sweet Monday notes. And another Monday night regular, Dawn, offered to design the cover for the book. "The whole process taught me how God uses our different strengths to accomplish what He wants," says Kim.

True to his word, Mark had 50 spiral-bound books, entitled *Sweet Monday, Women's Socials on a Shoestring*, printed. When Kim was asked to speak about her creative evangelism at a women's retreat not long after—a stretch





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for this woman who had a big fear of failure—she sold all but 5 of those 50 copies. Through word-of-mouth, speaking engagements, radio show appearances, one TV spot, and magazine and newspaper articles, Kim's shared the success of Sweet Monday. She printed *Sweet Monday Volume Two* in 2001, and so far has received more than two thousand requests for her books. Many of the requests come from people involved in women's ministry or outreach at their church. Since they often have little or no budget, the simple, "on a shoestring" ideas appeal to them.

A friend helped Kim set up a website to handle all the requests for information she receives from women who want to start their own Sweet Monday group. Currently Kim's aware of several Sweet Monday gatherings across town from her in Richmond and in Virginia Beach. She also knows of groups in Wisconsin, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and on several college campuses. She's sent her books to women in 37 states and to missionaries in Bulgaria, Mexico, and the UK.

"There's no other way to explain this widespread interest except God's using Sweet Monday as a tiny tool to reach women. The success certainly hasn't been based on *my* confidence, but on *Christ's* confidence. My heart is to share this surprise ministry God's given me so that He can be glorified," says Kim, who hopes that one day there'll be a Sweet Monday in every city and suburb. She also deeply desires that every woman who attends Sweet Monday leaves blessed and encouraged. "That's my mission—to encourage women. To encourage means 'to give courage





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to.' I want to give the women courage for the many difficulties, joys, and trials they face in everyday life. The courage to know they're not alone—that Christ is with them."

This is a truth Kim knows quite well. Looking back seven years, she realizes God was with her even in her loneliness. Not only did He answer her prayer for friends, He also gave her a ministry of connecting women to each other and to the Best Friend they ever could find. Today she loves sharing this example of God's amazing grace. How *sweet* the sound!

For more information about Sweet Monday go to www.sweetmonday.com. This article first appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *What is your definition of a fun time?*
- *How do you create fun times for yourself?*
- *Kim not only created a fun event for herself, but for many other women as well. Think of a simple way you can help other women find time for fun.*



kyria

A Wild Women Weekend



These women gather twice a year to renew friendships and faith.

By Nancy Rutherford

As the last car arrived that cold January night, seven of us women crept out onto the balcony of our YMCA mountain cabin. When our friends Margo and Julie emerged from the car, we belted our song, "It's fun to stay at the Y-M-C-A!" to welcome them to the fun and fellowship of another Wild Women Weekend. After our "stellar" performance, we carried their luggage and food supplies inside and reheated some fish stew for their belated meal.





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A Wild Women Weekend

For the past thirteen years, ten to twelve of us have packed our cars with cross-country skis, fishing poles, cross-stitch, Scrabble, and M&Ms for a bi-annual retreat in the Colorado mountains. Most of us met through our church's singles class eighteen years ago. Though more than half of us are now married, these relationships have grown into some of the deepest friendships we have—and our weekends away give us needed freedom, healing, and meaning as we celebrate them.

The idea originated from an article that Diane, now a mother of three, read about several women in their sixties who hiked together annually for twenty years. She shared her dream of staging a similar weekend with Phyllis, a friend from church who agreed this kind of retreat was exactly what she needed. So that first weekend, spent in a Glenwood Springs, Colorado, condo, these two new mothers alternated between pumping breast milk (for the little ones they'd left at home) and discussing with three other friends how to balance their roles as wife and mother. The second weekend these women realized that with no husbands or children around, they could "go wild" and do whatever they wanted. Thus, the name *Wild Women Weekend* was born. Since then our weekends have expanded beyond the initial five to include up to a dozen or more women, some joining us only for the daytime activities.

Our weekends usually begin with Friday night dinner, then continue to some sort of adventure on Saturday—such as hiking, skiing, or fishing—and end after lunch on Sunday. We try to eat most of our meals together, with each woman cooking only once. The rule of thumb is: If you cook, you don't clean up. Mealtimes create an





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atmosphere to brainstorm, reminisce, and enjoy prolonged conversations. During dessert one winter weekend, four old college roommates, Pam, Deb, Martha, and Phyllis, entertained the rest of us with dating stories from their single years. At the culmination of the weekend, Pam shared, "As we talked about that period of time, it gave me a better appreciation for my past, and for how much we've all grown."

Married, single, working, and stay-at-home women alike enjoy the break from our usual agendas. Phyllis, a self-employed businesswoman, wife, and mother of four, relishes these two times a year when she can choose her own schedule. She usually stays up and chats into the wee hours of the night. In contrast, Sharon, a single college professor, communes with God during her early morning hike, sometimes returning before the rest of us have even awakened.

Another bonus is sharing some of our favorite activities with some of our favorite people. Last summer we all packed into our cars to go to nearby Shadow Mountain Lake. The slower, catch-up-on-all-the-news group of Margo, Deb, Pam, Sue, and Martha chose the "low road" around the lake. Phyllis and Sharon, always challenged by a tough climb, attacked the "high road" to the summit. Eager to cast their flies in the water, Nance and Diane followed the river downwards looking for just the right angling spot, while Cordie and Nancy took off for the lake.

Getting away allows us to meet one of our greatest needs: conversation. As we cover subjects ranging from child discipline to aging parents, new recipes or a favorite





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book, we're blessed with wisdom and healing. At least four mothers in our group have children who are gifted or strong-willed. During the car ride up last summer, Pam talked with Sue, a mother of two girls, about her child-raising strategies. Later Pam talked with Diane, who recommended the book, *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary S. Kurchinka (Harper Collins), to use with her adopted precocious three year old. These two conversations provided her just the "medicine" she needed.

One weekend, DJ questioned aloud what it would be like to be married to her boyfriend. Kathy—who makes sure we get our daily minimum requirement of chocolate—asked her, "Well, has he seen how many M&Ms you eat yet?" Though tongue-in-cheek, this piece of advice encouraged DJ to be herself for her potential mate.

Two summers ago, Cordie, a hospital nursing supervisor whose motto seems to be "I want to try everything at least once," wanted to hike to the top of Hanging Lake, a 1,000-foot climb to a glacier lake near Glenwood Springs. The trek to this aquamarine water provided an adventure for us all. When she reached the lake summit, shouts and clapping reverberated across the lake. Cordie's achievement was commemorated with a group photo for our memory book.

The summer of 1992, two of DJ's high school-age nieces, Kerry and Kelly, were invited to join us for our weekend while on their Colorado vacation. One evening as our aching muscles reaped the benefit of DJ's massage therapy skills, we shared stories of our lives. These observant teenagers questioned us about dating, marriage, and faith.





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DJ recently wrote, "They still talk about that weekend. The most significant thing for them was seeing the love of God in our lives and how it's shared between us all. It encouraged them to maintain contact with their own friends and gave them hope to see so many of you at my wedding."

Within our group is a contingent who have answered God's call to evangelize the world beyond the United States. These women especially delight in renewed friendships when home on their furloughs. One of Patrice's furloughs coincided with our women's weekend. For the past several years she'd worked in a third-world country while doing research on her doctoral thesis. To her surprise, we staged a mock graduation ceremony to celebrate the degree she'd received two months earlier from UCLA. We dressed her in a cap and gown and stood her on a chair while Diane, our emcee, presented her with our special "Wild Women Weekend" diploma. This wasn't the first accomplishment we'd celebrated together. Over the years, we've toasted new marriages, births and adoptions, degrees, first published works, and new businesses. Commemorating these events together makes them—and our weekends—even more meaningful.

Sue joined us for the first time last winter—despite the chemotherapy treatments she was receiving at the time. Sporting a wig and wearing a smile, Sue's exuberance overwhelmed us. Her bout with breast cancer was sobering, and reminded us of how many had endured hardship over the past year. Six women still grieved for their fathers or close friends who had recently passed away. Three juggled transitions: into a new business, into first-time





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motherhood, and into a new neighborhood. By Saturday evening, instead of the usual games and storytelling, we were sharing tears. That evening, Margo, known for her sensitivity to the Spirit, began formulating a theme for our Sunday morning worship time. She asked us to listen while she read Ecclesiastes 3:1-11: "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven. ..." Then Margo asked us to reflect on which verse most described what kind of season we'd found ourselves in that past year. Sniffing and rustling tissues could be heard while each woman related her own story. Our shared grief and the ability to understand each other's pain united us into an even deeper bond of love, courage, and faith in our comforting and healing God.

In the context of women simply being together, healing occurs. But as Pam reminded us, "You can't manufacture things like trust, honesty, and a safe atmosphere." Perhaps it's the longevity of our relationships and the bond we share in Christ that's led to our deep friendships. Though we don't know what our lives will look like during our next retreat, we look forward to processing the issues midlife brings, eating chocolate while listening to friends share their stories, and posing once again for our last-minute group picture.

Nancy Rutherford is an engineering technician and freelance writer living in Colorado. This article first appeared in the March/April 1998 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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A Wild Women Weekend

Reflect

- *Ecclesiastes 3:4 says there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh." How often do you find yourself in a time of laughter? How might you increase that time?*
- *Who are the women that you can go "wild" with? What do you do together?*
- *How can you take an idea from this article and implement it in your life?*



The Spa Girls



Melissa Calvert and Lisa Seale teach friends to pamper themselves on the cheap and live richly in Christ.

By Camerin Courtney

A woman with a Wal-Mart bag tied on her head is addressing a roomful of women who are laughing and taking notes. The woman next to her is talking about hair color—how the plastic bag helps each application last longer and how to get two uses from each box of home hair-coloring. Both women are dressed in hot pink and black, and a large sign behind them announces that they're the Spa Girls.



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The "Girls" are Melissa Calvert and Lisa Seale, two 40something working moms in the Houston area who launched this creative women's ministry in early 2004. The "spa" in Spa Girls stands for Spiritual, Practical, and Amusing ways to live the godly life, which they teach in 60- to 90-minute demonstrations at women's retreats, luncheons, conferences, and parties.

They give six main presentations: Spa Cents, their signature talk, shows women how to make spa treatments for pennies with everyday household products. Teen Spa Cents gears this info for teenagers. BYOMB (Bring Your Own Make-up Bag and Bible) provides make-up lessons and scriptural truths about beauty. Home Cents includes tips to efficiently organize and manage home and family life. Money Cents teaches women how to set financial goals and create a livable budget. And Savvy Cents helps women decorate their homes on the cheap, including bargains from garage sales and thrift stores, and capture the true spirit of hospitality.

"Most women think they're too busy to take care of themselves," Melissa says. "But we remind women you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself. These presentations are a fun reminder of that truth, providing practical, economical ways to do so."

Sisters in Thrift

It all started with an "argument" when Lisa and Melissa found themselves seated next to each other at a Sunday-school class dinner. They'd met briefly a few weeks





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earlier when Melissa and her family showed up for an evening service, and Lisa welcomed the newcomers to her church.

"At that dinner, Melissa turned to me and told me she was the queen of thrift shops," Lisa says. "And I said, 'I beg your pardon, I believe that would be me.'" As they kept talking, they realized their shared love of a bargain was just one of many things they had in common. They both grew up in traditional Southern Baptist churches, believe in debt-free living, are make-up junkies, own dachshunds, and have a passion for worship music. They're also one year apart in age—Lisa's 42 and Melissa is 41—and have kids around the same age—Lisa's daughter, Erin, is 15, and her son, Ethan, is 12; Melissa's blended family includes a son, Bryan, who's 19, and three daughters, Lindsay, 15, Whitney, 14, and Courtney, 12.

Lisa and Melissa began serving together on their church's worship team, where Melissa sings and plays the flute and Lisa plays the keyboard. And, of course, they went thrift-store shopping together. While spending this time together, the women discovered their most poignant commonality—their shared grief. A couple months before they met, Melissa lost her brother to cancer. A few months before that, Lisa lost her dad.

"I'm an only child now," Melissa says. "I never had a sister and I didn't have many girlfriends while growing up. It's like God gave me a best friend at 40, right when I needed one. When we talk to women at our presentations, we find there's a real hunger for girlfriend time. We certainly understand that."





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The Spa Girls

You Go, Girls

A year into their friendship, Melissa and Lisa embarked on their first shared adventure—visiting a mutual friend who'd moved to Malaysia. It was there the idea of becoming the Spa Girls was born.

"When our friend invited us, I was a bit hesitant. I hadn't traveled overseas before," Melissa explains. "But Lisa's adventurous. Her response was, 'We can do this. People go over there all the time.'" When they found a cheap flight, the deal was sealed. "The trip was an awakening for me. I learned you're never too old to try something new or to take a risk." She had no idea this was a foreshadowing of what was to come.

While in Malaysia, Lisa and Melissa pampered themselves with some spa treatments, since they're much more affordable there. "We left there thinking, *Our friend is so lucky. We have to go home where we can't afford such things,*" Lisa says. "But then we also started thinking, *What about other women like us who can't afford or don't want to spend their money on expensive spa treatments? What can we do for them on the cheap?* And that's where the idea for Spa Girls got started."

Lisa and Melissa started scouring magazines, websites, drug stores, and product labels in search of frugal ideas. They planned to create a website where they could share their ideas with fellow thrifty chicks. But before they went about learning how to create a website, things snowballed. They shared their spa-treatments-on-the-cheap ideas at a slumber party with some friends. That earned them an





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invite to do a bridal shower. The bride was a bit older, so her friends wanted to do something nontraditional for the party. The spa treatments were a big hit.

Melissa's sister invited them to present at her church's women's retreat, and when their own church women's retreat announced a theme of Extreme Makeover, Lisa and Melissa got roped into the action. "I asked the organizer what they were doing for the makeover portion of the weekend," Melissa explains. "And they were like, 'What are you talking about? It's about making over your heart.' And I said, 'No, no, no. You don't understand. These women are going to expect some real makeovers, some girlie stuff.'" When the organizers heard about Lisa and Melissa's recent spa-treatment demonstrations, they invited them to provide the girlie touches. The retreat attendees loved it.

"We thought that was a one-time shot," explains Melissa. "But the women in attendance kept telling us, 'That was great. You need to do this for other women's events.'" So Melissa contacted women's ministries at Houston-area churches and asked if they'd be interested in similar presentations at upcoming events. They booked their first official "shows" that way, and through word of mouth, the ministry took off.

Bath Salts and Scripture

When Lisa and Melissa started perfecting their presentations, they realized these spa treatments and products provided them a creative, memorable way to share Scripture. "We emphasize that a woman's true beauty and self-worth come first and foremost from a personal





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relationship with Jesus," says Melissa. "So when we talk about lipsticks, we mention verses about the Lord setting a guard on our lips. When we show them how to make their own bath salts, we talk about believers being the salt of the earth. We hope these verses come to mind the next time the women put on their lipstick or soak in a hot bath."

So how can you pamper yourself and save money with common household products? "Did you know that bath salts are basically rock salt, oil, and fragrance?" Melissa asks in the Spa Cents presentation. The recipe, one of many they pass out to attendees, calls for one cup of rock salt or Epsom salt; 1 tablespoon of baby oil, mineral oil, sweet almond oil, glycerin, or olive oil; and any type of scent you enjoy. Place these items in a tightly sealed jar and turn it every few hours for a day or two before using.

You can make your own face mask using Pepto-Bismol or milk of magnesia. Lisa and Melissa ask for a volunteer to try this during their presentation. Rinsing your hair in mouthwash helps remove product build-up. And you can exfoliate your lips with an old toothbrush ("Preferably your own," Lisa jokes) and Vaseline. The Spa Girls encourage attendees to take at least one hour each month to pamper themselves. They also send each woman home with some homemade goodies and tip sheets listing all their ideas. While they're demonstrating these tips, Lisa and Melissa sprinkle in humor ("We're like Lucy and Ethel," Melissa says) and Scripture, such as 1 Samuel 16:7, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

"More than anything," Lisa says, "we want the women to know God thinks they're beautiful and loves them unconditionally."





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Toward the end of their presentations, Lisa and Melissa share the difficult journeys they've each traveled to learn and accept these truths. Lisa went through a season of depression years ago, and shares how holding onto the truths of God's Word, even when they didn't feel true, and leaning on others for support got her through the dark times. Melissa battled a life-threatening eating disorder from her teens through her late twenties and finally found healing in the truth that she's fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).

"We share these struggles because so often women look around at church or work and see other women looking so together," says Melissa. "We think they're perfect and have no worries. And that's just not true. Everyone struggles with something. Women love the make-up and money-saving tips we share, but seem to respond to our honesty the most."

Lisa adds, "We want to be one more voice sharing that there's grace and love and freedom in Jesus. It's available for everyone and it's free. You can't get more thrifty than that!"

Camerin Courtney is former managing editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article first appeared in the May/June 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Reflect

- *These women found beauty treatments offered a creative way to share Scripture with other women. What things do you and your friends enjoy that you might be able to add a scriptural element to?*
- *Melissa says, "We share [our] struggles because so often women look around at church or work and see other women looking so together." How do you think keeping up the perfect image around friends keeps us from growing together spiritually?*





Additional Resources

The Wisdom of Each Other by Eugene H. Peterson (Zondervan, 2001; 112 pages). The topics covered in this warm and highly personal correspondence are broad and varied, but one thing comes through with constancy and clarity: there is great value in a wise, experienced friend to help us see more clearly and to strengthen our growth in faith and godliness.

Finding a Spiritual Friend by Timothy Jones (Upper Room, 1998, 144 pages). Jones takes a fresh look at the centuries-old tradition of spiritual friends who guide, support, and encourage one another.

My Prayer-Buddy Devotional: For a Sisterhood of Prayer Partners by Janet McHenry (Amg Publishers, 2005; 112 pages). My Prayer Buddy Devotional will help you to intentionally pray for your prayer partner's deepest spiritual needs.



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Additional Resources

Girl Talk...God Talk: What Your Friends Can Teach You About Prayer by Sally Miller (Harvest House Publishers, 2006). Through the lens of friendship, Sally Miller reveals ways women can build an ongoing, meaningful prayer dialogue with God.

Traveling Together: Thoughts on Women, Friendship, and the Journey of Faith by Karla Worley (New Hope Publishers, n.d.; 224 pages). In this book, author Karla Worley draws from the rich well of friendships between women and the concept of walking together found in Ephesians 4:1-12.

Divine Secrets of Mentoring: Spiritual Growth Through Friendship by Carol Brazo (InterVarsity Press, 2004; 160 pages). In this book Carol Brazo tells powerful stories of the women who have shaped her understanding of key areas of Christian life: confession, forgiveness, prayer, integrity, self-image and much more.



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