



Beyond the Fellows Program

The C.S. Lewis Fellows Program brings together people from many walks of life with a common goal: to be around other likeminded folks who desire to grow deeper in their faith. A group of mid-career professional women, who are now in the fifth year of their journey together, recently paused and reflected on what drew them together in this program.

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On a bitterly cold winter night in early January, we gathered for dinner to welcome back one of our members from the mission field. It was the perfect opportunity to share our thoughts and especially our memories from that first year together. We began together in 2005: twelve mid-career professional women (well, one was slightly older) and two mentors. During the retreat at Wintergreen in September of that year, we met for the first time. There was plenty of opportunity that weekend to share our stories...to laugh and cry together and to bond. We ate, we hiked, we stayed up and talked late into the night. We were a diverse group. Some of us were married and some single. The careers were as varied as the women themselves. But what a joy it was to share openly about our faith walk and to see we shared a genuine desire to grow in our discipleship. As one of us described it, it felt like meeting "friends who also got a green card from Jesus to walk on earth confidently with faith in him and looking forward one day to get a citizenship in heaven."

Little did any of us know then that the ties that first drew us together would continue to keep us united for five years. At the end of that first year, a few debated about whether to continue on with Year Two, but ultimately we all signed on for the second year, with only one exception, which was due to a move. No one wanted to miss out on the opportunity to learn and grow together.

At the end of the second-year program, it looked like our time as a group was coming to an end. By then we were sisters in Christ, and our group had grown by two, who joined us from previous Fellows' groups. We knew that we had an exceptional gift in

this group and did not want to give up meeting together. We spent a weekend at the Chesapeake Bay to celebrate the completion of Year Two. While we were there, with plenty of time to reflect and talk about how we wanted to continue to grow deeper in our faith, we made the decision to stay together for an "unofficial" Year Three. Using the additional recommended reading list from the C.S. Lewis Institute (that no one has time to read while in the formal Year One and Two Fellows program), we had each brought some book titles that we wanted to read and spent a morning discussing the pros and cons of many options. This seemed to warrant another commitment and the group happily decided to move on together.

We continued some of the Fellows Program practices and modified others. For example, we kicked off our third year together with a wonderful opportunity to have our own retreat at Wintergreen.

At that time we lost two more original members from our group. One, a native of Azerbaijan, moved to Kansas to continue her scientific research at Kansas State University. The other, after much prayer and a leap of faith, went to the mission field in Papua New Guinea for two years with Wycliffe Bible Translators. The rest of us decided to read six books over the next twelve months and to have a social time every other month. Our missionary friend agreed to read the same books we did and to use email for her input to our discussions. This worked very well and we read a variety of books that the group had agreed on, some light and some quite heavy reading. This group was not all about study however, and we managed to have a lot of fun together at our social gatherings, from a Christmas tour and tea at the White House to a shopping trip and lunch

in Culpepper on the way to Wintergreen. We were often regaled with stories about life in a small town in Mississippi, courtesy of one of our members, who frequently kept us laughing. Most of all we continued our commitment to pray for one another. Our friend in Papua New Guinea commented on how wonderful it was to know that the group at home was praying for her, supporting her financially, and even sending regular care packages. Despite some rough times and loneliness, she knows that she is where the Lord wants her and has recently signed on for another two years.

The last few years of getting together since our first unofficial year seem almost to have been a foregone conclusion. The depth of friendship that has developed and the opportunity for continued growth in our faith made it obvious that the group would stay together. In fact, several members of the group have chosen to become mentors themselves, in large part because of the wonderful mentors we had. We continue with our monthly gatherings of reading one month and socializing and praying the next month. As in most groups there have been many changes. We have had a wedding, an international adoption, several job changes, moves, illnesses, and issues with families. Sounds like a family, doesn't it? We now think of ourselves as an extended family. Time and distance do not keep us from caring for one another.

Without exception, the group agreed that what drew us together was the quality of the Fellows Program—the well-chosen readings on topics of vital importance to the serious believer, the opportunities for additional growth from the speakers we heard through the Institute, and, of course, the many opportunities to be disciplined by our wise mentors. What cemented our group together was witnessing how God used both what we learned and our relationships to support each other through many significant life transitions. Career changes, seeking new direction, facing serious life and health issues were at the forefront of our time together. What we were reading seemed always to have a direct bearing on what was going on with us, and there were many opportunities to make life applications to what we studied. Of course some of the books were more applicable to us than others, but we could take away serious lessons from each one of them.

Inherent in our time together was the commitment to pray for one another, not only during our sessions but regularly throughout the week, month, and then year. As one sister put it, "Without my Fellows' prayers and love, I cannot imagine how I could have made my transition from being an international city

girl with a Ph.D. living on the high-speed-mode East Coast to living in the Midwest farmland with a lot of cows around." Prayer was the glue that held us all together.

What does the future hold for this group? Only God knows, but he has blessed us mightily in our sisterhood. He lights our path and directs our footsteps. May we bring glory to him in all that we do.

The group that put together this article includes these women:

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