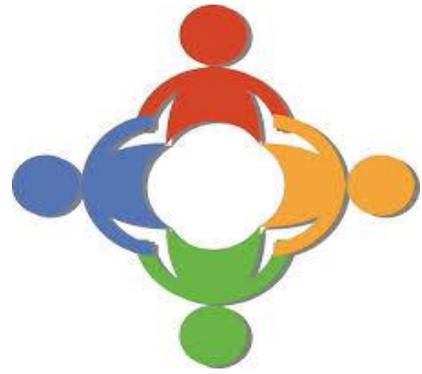


“Where Two or Three are Gathered” A Guide for Small Group Facilitators



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Congratulations! You have been called to facilitate a small faith-sharing group. Small faith-sharing groups are at the heart of the New Evangelization. These types of experiences ignite or animate the faith of the participants because they bring people together to have intentional faith conversations in an intimate, prayerful and respectful atmosphere. Faith-sharing can occur around a book the group has read, a bible-study program, a gathering around the Sunday Scripture readings, a program for returning Catholics, a multi-session program on a topic like prayer, Eucharist or discipleship.

A facilitator is a co-participant in the group. A facilitator is **not** the expert, the teacher, the “answer-person”, the problem-solver or the counselor. A facilitator creates the conditions for the group to grow in faith. Your job is simply to keep the group moving through the process. This guide will help you hone the skills necessary to “facilitate” (or “make easy”) the group process.

“When two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20)

First and foremost, a facilitator of a faith-sharing group is mindful of the fact that Christ is present when the group gathers and that his Holy Spirit guides all we do. It is important to remind people in whose name we gather, and be grounded in a prayerful stance of openness to the Holy Spirit at all times. That is why small-groups always begin and end with prayer.

Preparing prayer does not have to be complicated. Some programs give the facilitator excellent suggestions. For example, *Little Rock Scripture Study* uses a simple four-part “conversational prayer” process at the beginning of each session. The *Landings* Program has a short closing prayer that participants say together at the end of each session. Whatever your prayer, be sure it invites participation of the group members. Use song, antiphonal responses, intercessions, the Our Father or Doxology to evoke participation.

Set up a simple “prayer space” in the center of your circle. A small table with a candle, a Bible, and an icon, picture or other appropriate symbol is appropriate. Be attentive to the color of the liturgical season, too. It should be simple and uncluttered, yet provide the visual centering for the group. Soft music in the background during prayer time can also be appropriate.

Before the session:

- Pray for each member of your group and for yourself – that this experience be a good opportunity to grow in faith
- Contact each group member before the first session to welcome him/her and be sure each member knows when and where the session will take place. Provide directions if necessary. Provide each member with your contact information.
- Prepare for each session prayerfully. Jot down notes, thoughts, re-frame any questions that might be confusing, etc.
- Provide name tags, especially for the first few sessions.
- Prepare your prayer environment.
- If your meeting will take place in a home, find a space that is without distractions.
- Arrange your space in a circle or an arrangement where everyone can see one another.

During the session:

- Establish a climate of hospitality and welcome. Be sure people know where facilities are located, where to place coats, etc.
- Acknowledge and recognize each person. Welcome them and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Review expectations of being in the group. If the program you are using requires preparation beforehand, remind them of what the commitment is.
- Hold the session to the desired agenda. Honor everyone's time by beginning and ending on time. Do not wait for latecomers.
- Establish a commitment to confidentiality. Be sure each member understands that what is shared in the group is personal and not to be shared with those outside the group.
- Encourage participation, but do not force it. It is best not to ask for responses in sequence (going around the circle), but to invite responses when one wishes to share.
- Keep the discussion moving, but sometimes a little silence is necessary to give members a chance to gather their thoughts.

- Listen attentively to each member. Do not feel you have to comment on everything as this sets up a dialog between the member and facilitator only.
- Frame your session with some introductory time to do an opening prayer and check-in on how everyone is doing, and some closing time to do a closing prayer and any announcements or reminders for the next session.
- Clarify responsibilities for the next session if you are sharing or delegating them. As the group becomes formed, it is a good idea to rotate who will lead prayer, who will provide simple refreshments.

After the session:

- Give members opportunity for feedback. Provide index cards for them to respond to three fill-ins: “I liked.....”, “I learned.....”, “I suggest.....”. Provide a box or basket to collect the responses.
- Review the session honestly taking feedback into account.
- Bring any follow up questions, issues to the Parish Coordinator.
- Contact absent members. Let them know they are missed and cared about. Invite them to next session and provide the time and place.

Trouble-shooting tips for the facilitator

One of the tasks of the facilitator is to create the conditions for optimum participation and growth in faith. This begins with the facilitator him/herself. Avoid the “extreme” types of facilitating styles: the Authoritarian or the Passive. The *Authoritarian* facilitator comes off as the one with the all the answers. This sets the stage for a passive group who waits for the facilitator to provide all the commentary. The *Passive* facilitator fades totally into the background and lets the group flow where it may. This style sets the stage for some to dominate the process, or go off on tangents unrelated to the agenda. The ideal style is somewhere in the middle of these extremes.



Let’s look at some common situations that present themselves in a group and some strategies for dealing with them:

- **Interrupting, jumping in**
 - *“Let’s stop for a second and be sure we are listening to each other.”*
- **Two people talking at once**
 - *“We seem to have two conversations going at once. Let’s hear from ‘A’ and then ‘B’.”*
- **No response to a question**
 - *“Silence is good – it provides some reflection time.” Or you may say “Perhaps this question is too difficult to respond to. Let’s rephrase it.”*
- **One person criticizes another’s comment**
 - *“What _____ said is from his/her felt experience and has value. Our feelings are not open to group scrutiny. We are each different in how we think and feel.”*
- **Member remains silent**
 - Gently invite participation without putting the person on the spot. Make personal contact with the person over refreshments to help him/her get more comfortable. If this continues, talk to the person before or after the session. Mention to him/her, *“You have been listening intently. Is there anything you would like to add?”*
- **Repetition of same idea**
 - Summarize the main points and move on with, *“That’s helpful. Let’s hear from someone else.”*
- **Wandering off the topic**
 - *“Let’s bring ourselves back to our topic (main point). Our question is.....”*
- **One person dominates**
 - Remind the person that each member needs to have an opportunity to share; *“What you are saying is helpful, but let’s hear from someone else. It’s important that we hear from others.”*
- **Sharing becomes too academic**
 - *“This is a very interesting discussion, but this is not our purpose today. Let’s look at our question again so we can focus on our session.”*

The AARR Method (from Renew International)

When a person says something inappropriate or strays from the process, this is a simple process involving active listening, respecting the person who raises the issue, and refocusing the group – **A**cknowledge what is said, **A**ffirm the person, **R**edirect the conversation, **R**efocus the question.

Acknowledge that you have heard the person:

“You certainly feel strongly about this.”

“I can see you’ve done a lot of thinking about this.”

“It must have taken some courage to share that with us.”

“You sound frustrated.”

Affirm the person for who he or she is:

“You really seem interested in this.”

“I can see why you feel that way.”

“That’s something we’ve all thought about.”

“Our hearts go out to you and we will pray for you.”

Redirect by showing that the issue cannot be addressed in the faith-sharing session:

“At this session we are not going to be able to change the Church’s/media’s/society’s position.”

“We are not trained counselors/theologians, etc. If after the session, you would like to speak further with someone, that can be arranged.”

“After this session, some might wish to write letters to express to editor/legislator/etc. to express our stance on this issue.”

Refocus the group back to faith-sharing:

“Even though we can’t resolve this issue, we can grow in our faith by looking at the material before us”

“I’m glad you mentioned that. It brings us back to the topic we began with.”

“Let’s get back to listening to how Christ is working in our lives.”

An additional tip for facilitators.... Words to be avoided:

- Generalizations - “all people”, “everyone”, “you”, “no one”, “always”, “never”, “the Church”, “the parish”, “those people”...
- Judgmental – “should”, “ought”, “cannot”, “fault”, “blame”
- Confrontational – “you are...”, “why do you/don’t you”, “how come/could/can you...”.

In any discussion, it is best to own your comments by the use of “I statements”. For example, *“In my experience, I find....”, “I respect your right to that opinion, but I feel..”*

An example of an “I-statement” in a potentially confrontational situation is *“I feel frustrated when you jump in before I finish my thought because I have the right to take my turn to speak just like everyone else.”* This is more effective than a more confrontational “you-statement” like, *“You always interrupt me!”*

This short guide will get you started with confidence to facilitate your small group. If you wish to get further training in facilitation skills, there are some excellent resources to do so:

Echoes of Faith Plus: Adult Faith Formation Methodology (DVD)- Segments 2 – Faith Sharing Groups; Segment 3 – Facilitating Faith Sharing Groups . This DVD is available at the Office of Lay Ministry and Parish Faith Formation (518-453-6670)

Little Rock Scripture Study – Leadership Training –Topic #6 – Spirituality of the Small Group Facilitator; Topic #7 – Techniques for Facilitating a Small Group; Topic # 8 – Introducing Scripture Study to your Small Group. This video training is available for *free* online at www.littlerockscripture.org.

Facilitating for Growth: A Guide for Scripture Study Groups and Small Christian Communities by Barbara J. Fleischer. Liturgical Press, 1993.

Sowing Seeds: Essentials for Small Community Leaders – RENEW International, 2011. (Much of “Where Two or Three are Gathered” is based on a section of this booklet). www.renewintl.org