

Celebrating Being a Facilitator of a Small Faith Group Process
Ideas for the Journey
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Jesus says,
“Where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.”
(Matthew 18: 20)

If you have agreed to be a facilitator of a small faith group or you are simply pondering the idea, the first task is to be silent before God. Come before God, empty of all preconceived ideas as to what this venture will be like. Place in God’s hands all fears, anxieties and confusion. As we turn over to God the clutter in our hearts we make space for God’s voice and mission to be heard and followed.

Facilitating a small group in sharing faith is first a call from God. God invites us to take a risk in enabling others to tell their stories of God’s movement in their lives. This is a sacred task. Everyone’s story is holy and is worthy of embrace. We call the group to ponder the words and ideas we each share as stories carrying a special presence of God. Trust that God invites you to guide the group. In saying “yes” to this mission you acknowledge that call. Empty yourself by handing over your heart so that God can fill it with what you need to fulfill the mission. Approach this task with a poverty of spirit. If such is your approach you will soon discover that your heart is being filled with riches beyond your imaginings. You truly will receive more than you give.

Once you have said “yes” to God’s call and trust God is with you then it is time to make conscious preparations for the work. Obtain a list of the participants in your small faith group. Spend time bringing each person to God in prayer. Ask God for the gifts you need to help each person share faith and receive the blessing they need from the group experience.

Remember that your task is neither to instruct participants in the faith nor to have answers for faith problems. As a group leader you must believe that faith already exists abundantly in the hearts of the people. Your privilege is to help make it possible for people to articulate their faith their way. Everyone has experienced God’s presence in their lives; your task is to invite members of your group to name their experience so they can see the beauty and wonder of God in their experience.

Enabling others to tell their stories means that we must set our own agendas aside. We certainly can add our story to the group’s sharing but our story and words should not dominate the gathering. In fact, the less we say, the more it may help

animate the others to share.

Faith sharing blossoms in a sacred environment where one finds unconditional love. This love provides the security in which people feel at peace sharing their story. In preparation for facilitating a group, as you prayerfully bring each person to God, ask God for the grace to affirm that each person has a grace-filled story to tell. Pray that your presence can be a sign of God's unconditional love and acceptance of each person in their uniqueness.

St. Benedict tells us that we must welcome guests as Christ. A wonderful act of hospitality is to call each member of your group before the first meeting to welcome them to the group and to express your own hope of the fruit it could yield. Let them know the details of where the group is meeting and the time frame for gathering. This welcome call will help to establish comfort.

Check in with your group members regularly. Assure them that you would like to hear from them if they are unable to attend a gathering. If someone simply does not show up, call him or her during the week. If someone seems a bit troubled during a session, take the risk of talking with him or her alone or after the session, or later calling them. All of us have a deep need to be recognized. When Jesus recognizes Zacchaeus in the tree, calls him by name and proclaims that he wishes to be with him, Zacchaeus is transformed. Simple gestures of recognition, made in love, have the power to transform.

In preparation for being a facilitator, take time to name for yourself what made a particular group experience in the past a positive experience for you. Get in touch with why you liked being part of it. It may help to journal about these experiences. Think about how you can make such experiences part of your present experience. Recall what made a group experience negative for you. These, too, may be worth journaling. Come up with your own list of two or three hopes you have for your group. Being conscious of our hopes can help make them become real.

Remember that the group that you are facilitating is a faith-sharing group. Your role is not to teach but to encourage the stories of faith from participants. There is no right or wrong story of faith. Each is filled with a great deal of mystery and awe and is worthy of reverence. One reverences a story, as St. Benedict says by, "Listening with the ear of the heart." We listen with compassion, making no judgments. We know that God works in wide and diverse ways in people's lives. We must let go of our preconceived notions of how we think God should work and strive for the ability to wonder at the unique ways in which God's presence is made known. This involves an open heart. As a facilitator, your role is to model qualities of "listening with the ear of the heart," compassionate listening, non-judgmental listening and openness. Your modeling will invite others in the group to do the same. Through this process of facilitating you can expect your heart to become bigger and wider to embrace diversity and newness of God's presence.

A facilitator's role is to create a sense of belonging by building trust within the group. A very basic practice for trust building is confidentiality. It is good to remind each other of this guideline each time a meeting takes place. If one is to share what is deep in the heart one wants to be assured that this sharing will be respected and held as holy. Sharing by individuals should never be talked about outside the group setting.

Other practices that can build a sense of belonging involve how we consciously respond to people. If a person is struggling to express himself or herself, we need not jump in to give them words. We can simply practice gentle patience. We empathize by not worrying about what we will say in response to someone. Our non-verbal responses can be more effective than words. We need not be problem solvers for each other. Our goal is to create an unconditional loving place in which others can name their stories.

If our tendency is to want to problem solve it will be important to develop in ourselves a comfort in living with questions. Perhaps better would be to simply sit with the mystery of God remembering that God is love beyond our imagining. This can allow us to become comfortable with walking away with more questions than answers knowing that it is through them that we touch, in our own way, the great and awesome mystery of God's presence.

Belonging can also be fostered through the practice of "checking in" with each participant as the gathering begins. For example, following prayer, you might invite group to each complete a simple open-ended statement such as: *A way in which I experienced God's joy this week was... One word that God seems to be repeating to me this week is... Something that I am praying for in our world today is...because...*

Questions such as the above are called icebreakers. They are simple questions that invite us to move out of our selves and to prepare for deeper sharing. Our simple response gets us started speaking, laughing and attending to each other. Once that begins we feel more at ease. Relationships begin to form. We learn things about each other.

Another action that can help create a sense of belonging is to have a small candle for each member of the group. When members arrive they light their candle. Then the facilitator can light a candle for each person not present, reminding the group that even when we are absent our presence is not forgotten. This candle recalls the gift of faith that already resides in our hearts through Baptism. It is a sign of our commitment to share the light of faith.

Facilitating a group will present challenges. If we are a bit clumsy in the beginning, recall that God doesn't ask for perfection. Jesus chose Peter who often said awkward things at inappropriate times. James and John asked questions that some would say were out of place. Jesus did not tell them they were not adequate for the

job. Jesus continued to encourage them to share their gifts and nurture in themselves an ability to minister. We, too, can be assured that over time we will develop the skills to deal with the challenges.

Challenges we might spend time contemplating and praying about are:

- *How will I deal with someone who seems to dominate the sharing?*
Responses to this question may include gently asking to hear responses from other member of the group. We can remind each other that it is necessary for us to be conscious of giving each person an opportunity to talk. We might directly say, “You seem to have a lot to say on this topic. Let’s hear from others.” Remember your role as facilitator is to draw the whole group into conversation.
- *How will I deal with the person who never talks?*
Remember we all approach life differently. Some of us are great extroverts who talk very easily. Others are introverts who need time to reflect upon what they will say before they say it. So, responses to this question may include gently recognizing this person’s presence and directly asking them if they wish to add to the conversation. We might also assure them that their quietness is perfectly fine, but that we enjoy hearing from them. If a quiet person does speak up, take time to affirm their response. This may help them become more comfortable sharing in the future. Do not presume a person’s silence means they are not responding to the group experience. They may simply be digesting it all. Provide moments of stillness so that introverts have time to ponder what they want to say. If there does seem to be something more to a person’s silence it may be helpful to speak with them outside of the group setting. We can let them know that their silence has been noticed and ask if they are feeling comfortable in the group or if there is something that would help them feel more comfortable.
- *What if someone’s problems begin to dominate group sharing?*
Responses to this question may include gently calling people’s attention back to the main question for the week. Offer to talk with the person after the gathering. Once alone with the person try to determine if there are other resources the person might find helpful such as a parish staff member or a particular support group.
- *What if tears and emotions well up in group members?*
Remember that emotions just are – they are one of the marvelous gifts that remind us of our humanity. Tears can be beautiful. We can simply let them be. We need not have wordy responses. Appropriate anger sometimes needs to be expressed. We can let a person vent without responding with words. However, once again we must be conscious of not letting one person dominate. We can simply acknowledge someone’s feelings and then invite the group to return to the subject at hand. Passionate feelings towards issues are not bad. We can acknowledge someone’s strong convictions, pointing out the good we see in them. However, again, we should not let one person’s passion dominate the group. We gently return the group to the topic and invite others to be heard.

Always try to honor the time frame for a gathering. This expresses respect for the gift of time. Setting and following a procedure for each gathering can help members feel a wholeness. On the other hand, we cannot box the Spirit. A balance needs to be found between flexibility and staying on track. Be sensitive to the spirit of the group.

Do not feel that all discussion questions need to be addressed. The questions serve the larger purpose of inviting people to share their stories of God's action in their lives. If a question seems to go no where or the group is struggling to understand the question, move on to another. Do not spend a lot of time trying to figure out the meaning of a question. Again, keep the goal before you, which is to invite people to talk about faith and nourish one another with their stories.

The questions presented in the this process are meant to be open-ended. There is no one correct answer for a question. They are intended to help us recall stories and events which we can then share. This invites one to ponder on many different levels. Sometimes one question raises other questions. We can encourage even more pondering by asking people to share examples. There may be a lot of feeling surrounding our remembering. It is important for the facilitator to give people time to remember. If silence results after posing an open-ended question let it be. In fact, several moments of silence could be invited, allowing people time not only to remember but to contemplate meaning behind the story. It also gives them space to name and perhaps experience the feelings surrounding their response. In our lives it is not only important to tell the story but to speak of the meaning that we give to the story. Very often, God is found in that meaning.

One of the most profound experiences a small faith group can have is the experience of communal silence, especially in the fast-paced unreflective society in which we live. The group may practice sitting in silence during prayer time. There is a powerful fullness that can be experienced during this silence in God's presence. We quietly get in touch with the holy ground we occupy. We give God room to be heard in our hearts. The same silence may occur as we contemplate questions. As a facilitator, the tendency may be to want to fill silent moments. At such times we should consciously pull back and allow the silence to have its place. God says to us, "Be still and know that I am God." God whispers profound truths to us in the silence and to hear them requires listening with the heart.

Helen Keller once said, "No pessimists ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit." Facilitate with optimism. If the group becomes pulled into negative comments or problems, be alert. Quietly ask the Spirit to lift the group to a higher place. Sometimes it can help to ask: "What is God asking of us in the face of this problem?" "What blessing might be found in this trouble?" "How might we see this situation in a more positive light?" Our faith is all about finding resurrection in the midst of darkness and death. The glory of the paschal mystery is the moving from darkness to light.

Each of us is a special work of God. We carry God's imprint in all we think, say, believe and do. We are sacraments. This means that when we meet each other we can touch and know a part of God's real presence. As we gather with one another we are invited to *enjoy* the presence of God each person brings. We delight and smile with gladness upon each other. We can let our hearts leap for joy as we open to the marvelous mysteries of God. This is prayer. In our very persons we are faith stories. Our presence often shares a more profound story than our words. Make it a habit to invite the group to *enjoy* one another. Remember, too, the following reflection by Leo Buscaglia: "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest accomplishment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

Practice the art of finding God in the ordinary events of life. Honor this simple but most profound revelation of God. As Catholics we approach life with an incarnational perspective. This means that we believe all of life can be filled up with God. Brother James Ebner, a wonderful professor, once said, "We are swimming in God's grace." Allow members the opportunity to speak about God in the ordinary. Marvel with one another at God's beauty revealed in a sunrise, a budding flower, an unexpected kindness, a phone call, a gesture of peace, a baby's laugh or cry. Encourage talk of these ordinary experiences of God. Finding God close while doing the dishes, emptying the trash or organizing files is just as powerful an experience as extraordinary events. Once again, we often will not take note of these except in hindsight. Give each other time to acknowledge God's presence in the ordinary. Talk about these experiences with a true sense of the sacred. God is most present in the everyday, the mundane, the simple.

Finally, never forget that as you facilitate a group the Spirit is alive in your midst. The Spirit works through you to accomplish the work that needs to be done. Trust in the Spirit doing much more than you can accomplish. Trust that God is acting in each person's life in ways you cannot comprehend. A negative response by someone may turn out to be a profound prompting or nudge by God in their life. Let God do His work. Let go of worries or concerns as to whether or not you are succeeding. God works through our frailties. Surrender to God.

A Facilitator's Prayer:

Loving God,
 You who delight in relationships,
 You who are joy -
As circles of people gather to celebrate the great wonder of Your presence -
 Be with me now as I seek to enable
 Your stories to be told and celebrated.
I invite You to work through my fragile humanness
 To bring about a new awareness and experience of Your love
 In the hearts of Your people who gather.
Let the glory of Your light shine upon our gathering,
 That we might become an ever brighter fire of Your love
 Changing and transforming our world.
Gather us into Your heart,
 So that in one spirit of peace and joy we might give you praise,
 Through the presence and stories we share.
Let us remember that the great story of Your presence
 Never stops unfolding in our lives.
 As we embrace Your presence in one another,
 May our hearts expand and widen to embrace the whole world.
Strengthen, direct, console, affirm, encourage, nourish
 Through my compassionate heart and spirit
 This ministry of enabling faith stories to be told.
I surrender this gathering,
 I surrender myself as Your instrument,
 Into the great story of Your love being born today.



Questions for Discussion:

- How have I felt or experienced the call from God to be a facilitator of a small faith group? What are the feelings that surround my response to this call? How have I brought these feelings to God in prayer?
- What does it mean for me to approach the ministry of facilitating a faith sharing group with a “poverty of spirit?”
- I am being called to be a facilitator of a particular type of group – a faith sharing group. How do I experience this process of facilitating as different from being an instructor in the faith or catechist?
- What preconceived ideas as to how this group will go do I bring to this adventure of facilitating? What will help me to lay aside my personal agenda and be open to things happening in my group that are beyond my imaginings?
- What qualities of spirit will I try to nurture in my small faith group to invite the sharing of faith stories? How will I nurture these qualities?
- As I recall past group experiences what made them positive for me? What made them negative for me? What are three hopes I have for my group?
- How and when have I experienced my story of faith being revered by another? How can I work to help the group reverence each other’s stories?
- What do I believe contributes to a sense of belonging in a group process? What are concrete actions I can take to nurture a sense of belonging and welcome in my small faith group?
- What challenges do I fear in this ministry of facilitating small faith groups?
Can I name concrete ways to meet these challenges?
How might one deal with one who dominates group sharing?
How might one deal with one who is quiet in the group?
If someone’s problems begin to dominate the group sharing what can one do?
- What are some ways I might practice silence in the small faith group setting? What frightens me about silence? What excites me about silence?
- Can I name times in my life when I have had to live with the questions more than answers?
What might I do to establish comfort in my group with being with the questions rather than having many answers?

- What practical things can I do to nurture an enjoyment of each other's presence?
How will I make space for laughter in my group? How will I respond if negative humor shows itself?
- Can I name ways in which I have found God in the ordinary events of my life?
What is one ordinary event that stands out for me as extraordinary? Why?
What have ordinary events taught me about God's presence?
- What meaning have I found in the stories of God's movement in my life?
When and how have these meanings occurred to me?
How can I allow space for people to not only name their story but to identify the meaning of their story?
- What is my response to the statement: "It is God who does the work in and through me?"
Can I name a time God worked through my frailty or weakness?
As I come in touch with my weaknesses in this process of facilitating, how might I respond to these weaknesses?
- Some of the best advice someone once gave to me was to enjoy doing what I do.
How will I practice approaching the work of being a facilitator with joy?
- What is my prayer as I facilitate this small faith group?