

Guidelines for Facilitating Small-Group Faith-Sharing Discussion

When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. (Acts 1:13–14)

Joining fully with sisters and brothers in worship . . . neutralizes a tendency toward excessive self-centeredness and fosters a spirit of charity, of love reaching out toward others. (Joseph M. Champlin)

The purpose of small-group discussion of scripture is to hear the word or words which God is speaking to us through the scriptures; to relate God's word or words to what's happening in our lives right now and then to determine what each of us is individually and occasionally collectively called to do or to change as a result.

A small-group discussion invariably also leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the contents as well as to our own spiritual enrichment. In sharing our reflections, we can point out to each other details we may otherwise have missed. The actual verbalization of our responses to the questions and our listening to the other participants' reflections will lead to a greater clarity and depth of understanding of the subject matter.

When we participate in a small-group discussion, we often receive helpful insights and personal experiences related to the topic. In short, the shared reflections of several people who have read scripture or spiritual material together usually provide a much richer experience than just a private reading of the material.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Before starting a new group, be sure your participants have all the information regarding the meeting venues, days and times, and anything you might want them to bring to the meeting. You will need copies of the resource material to be used for the meeting. For example, if you are focusing on the Sunday readings, you will need the Sunday Scriptures and commentaries on the readings for the weeks you are planning to cover.

If you plan to meet in different homes, you will need to find host volunteers.

If you plan to have light refreshments, arrange with the group on how to handle it.

It would be helpful to have participants wear name tags that can be used for several weeks.

ENVIRONMENT:

If possible, have a Bible (opened) and a lit candle in the middle of the space where you have gathered.

SACRED SONG:

Playing a sacred or religious song has huge potential to create a sacred space in which to hear God's word. So please have at least one member of the group learn how to do this. It can be done using cell phones and the free apps that are available.

- Select the icon for your browser.
- In the search bar, type the title and/or composer of your preferred spiritual song.
- Be aware that not all selections are available for free and not all are spiritually based.
- Put your phone on speaker so all can hear.

JOURNALS/WRITING PAPER AND PENS:

Having simple journals or writing paper and pens available for participants to write down the word/words they have heard God speak to their hearts certainly helps with memory, but it also helps to reflect back during the week to see what God was saying to us and how we responded. It's also a first step to learning to compose a prayer based on the word we have heard and it helps to keep us focused on leading a God-centered and directed life.

RESOURCE MATERIAL:

Prior to your meeting, be sure to have adequate supplies of the readings and commentaries to provide to the participants. For all subsequent meetings, participants are encouraged to read the scripture readings and commentaries on them and be prepared to read out loud at the meeting. Remember though, that not all people like to read out loud in public.

MEETING FORMAT:

When you are ready to begin the meeting, you can open with the following (or similar) words:

1. *Good evening/morning/afternoon. I am glad you decided to say 'yes' to the invitation to participate in this small study group (or whatever it is you are gathered for).*
2. *My role is to make sure that there are no fistfights 😊 While I don't have a lot of experience facilitating a small group, I will try my best to keep us focused on our topic. As you will see, the format that we will be following is pretty straight forward. A bit of self-deprecating humor establishes the fact that no one is present as an expert. It sets the anticipation that all will participate and acknowledges that the Holy Spirit speaks through each and all.*
3. *A word about confidentiality. If anyone shares something from their personal lives, it is very important that such sharing remains within these walls.*
4. *While we may disagree with other people's points of view, we should always respect them.*

5. *Normally, our sessions will take 90 minutes (decide on the length of your meeting). With your cooperation, we will endeavor to always start and close our meetings on time.*
6. *To help us to get to know each other, I invite you to share your name, how long you have been in the parish and what motivated you to come to this group. Facilitator may wish to begin the sharing.*

At the close of the first meeting you may wish to add the following remarks:

1. I/we are very glad you decided to try this way of deepening your appreciation of God's holy word in scripture or the focus of the spiritual reading material.
2. Next week we will begin at_____. [If there is a change of meeting place announce it.]
3. If possible prepare for our time together by praying with the readings.
4. If you have refreshments, invite group to remain on for fellowship.
5. Name tags are a helpful way to help group members to know each other's name. Decide on whether to collect name tags or let the participants keep them.

SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR USING FATHER TOBIN'S COMMENTARIES:

Before starting, allow a few minutes for members to reconnect; get to know one another better, then...

Step 1: Call the group to prayer:

Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.

Step 2: Pause for a minute.

Step 3: Play a religious song.

Step 4: Opening Prayer

Participants could take turns saying the opening prayer each week or preferable is for everyone to pray the Opening Prayer provided in the commentaries out loud and together. For example:

Father, we thank you for gathering us together for this time of sharing and reflection. Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit who is present and active in each of us. Help us to share our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Help us also to listen to one another with love and respect. Bind us together in love and help us to be clear channels of your wisdom and love for one another. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Step 5: Response to last week's word

This is a good time to spend no more than 10 minutes sharing how the word/words of scripture that we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week –

was there impact from hearing the proclamation at Sunday Mass? Did the words impact your thinking and/or behavior during the week? Did change occur and how was it? (For the talkers, this can be a lengthy explanation – a reminder of time constraints so that everyone can share may be necessary.)

Step 6: Focus Statement

This section provides a brief summary of the three readings and/or information regarding the liturgical season or feast.

Step 7: Readings and commentaries.

Now we come to a very important part of our time together when we are called to *listen* to God's word. Jesus says "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mk 4:9).

The primary focus of our reflection/discussion is the Gospel. Participants are encouraged to read the first and second readings and the commentaries before the meeting to allow enough time to spend with the message of Jesus in the gospel. After the gospel is proclaimed, ask participants to identify just a word or phrase that stood out for them. They may want to write it down to remember. (There is no need for additional comment or explanation at this time.) Ask participants to read the gospel and commentary, remembering that not all participants like to read in public.

Step 8: Proclamation of the Gospel

As we listen to this gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content of the gospel.

(A member of the group proclaims the gospel. After the reading pause...)

In this second reading of the gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge for us to embrace. Let us now take a moment to quietly meditate on the gospel text. Write down the word or words that touched your heart.

Step 9: Gospel Commentary

Let us now read the gospel commentary privately.

Step 10: Faith-sharing questions:

This segment draws on participants' responses to a series of questions relating to the readings and how they apply to their own personal lives. This is the most challenging part of the session as you will need to (a) keep the participants focused on the questions, and (b) keep the talkers from dominating the discussion and find a way to elicit responses from the quiet ones.

There are several methods to help all participants to share their faith. You may want to vary it from question to question and/or from week to week.

1. Go around the circle of participants, offering each one an opportunity to participate. You can introduce this part of the session in the following way:

We will now take some time to respond to the faith-sharing questions. In order to

give everyone an opportunity to share, we will go around the room. If you prefer not to share on a particular question, you can say “pass.” There is no need to comment on other participants’ responses.

PAUSE.

To get us started, I will begin with my response to the first question.

When you are done, invite the person on your left or right to share.

2. A second effective way to give everyone an opportunity to share is by sharing one’s response with the person on our left or right. This is particularly helpful for the introverts who prefer not to share in a wider group AND it also takes less time than everyone waiting for each participant to share in the circle. This is a good way to insure that all participants verbalize out loud the answer to the first question – What word or phrase did you hear God speak to your heart?
3. A third way to enable all to share is by having small groups of three or four who later come back to the wider group.
4. After participants have shared their response to questions with the person next to them, now the whole group can share their responses to questions two, three, four, five and six. It is especially good to go around the room when the same people are doing all the talking and the quieter ones are saying very little.

Step 11: Journaling

Having listened to God’s Word and to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. Example: “Jesus in today’s gospel you gave your peace to your guilty disciples. Help me to be a peacemaker in my home and environment.” In this time of Journaling, go wherever the Spirit leads you.

Step 12: Prayer Response to God’s Word

The facilitator can introduce this part of the meeting with these or similar words:

“Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. See if you can share prayer however brief on the gospel you have just heard, discussed and journaled about.

Facilitator should not be afraid of long pauses. When all have shared a prayer on the gospel go to the next step.

Step 13: Responding to the Word. Consider the Message

“This is the part of our time together when the rubber hits the road, when we are challenged to name one way we can respond to God’s word. In his Epistle, St. James tells us that “we must be doers of the word and not just hearers.” What is one way you will act on the message of today’s gospel?

Initially, it is good to respond to this question with one other person.

Step 14: Prayers of Thanksgiving, Petition and Intercession

Let us now share personal prayers of thanksgiving (prayers in gratitude for graces received), petition (prayers for self) and intercession (prayers for others). Perhaps you have some special intentions you would like for the group to pray for, prayers of thanksgiving for blessings in your life, prayers relevant to today's subject, prayers for things going on in our larger world."

The facilitator should suggest that participants address their prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession directly to God (e.g., "Lord, I lift up to you my spouse who is ill") rather than simply telling the group what it is they would like prayers for (e.g., "I would like prayers for my spouse"). The desire becomes a prayer when it is directly addressed to God.

Step 15: Closing Prayer (together)

Father Tobin passed to eternal life on January 1, 2021. His personal website www.eamontobin.com was started before his passing and reflects his thoughts and ideas. Please check it frequently as it is updated with more of his writings, photos and inspiration for life.

If you have any questions about facilitating a small group, do not hesitate to contact Laura Dodson – ldodson@ascensioncatholic.net or visit Father Tobin's personal website. Many small groups throughout the country use his commentaries to reflect together on the Sunday Readings.

May the Holy Spirit guide and direct your efforts to know and live God's word.

Father Eamon Tobin (1947 – 2021)

Pastor of Ascension Catholic Church Melbourne, Florida until his death January 1, 2021
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ROLE OF THE GROUP FACILITATOR

The facilitator role is to keep participants on the topic being discussed. The facilitator also prevents any one or two people from dominating the exchange by encouraging all participants to share both thoughts and personal experiences.

In the initial stages of a small-group experience, especially when the participants do not know one another, there may be a tendency for the facilitator to consciously, but more often unconsciously, take on the role of “answer-person” or “group expert.” The participants themselves may unconsciously place the group leader in that role. It is crucial for the group leader not to allow himself or herself to become the “answer person” or “dominant talker.” No one individual should present himself or herself as expert or teacher of the rest. If people are looking for lectures or mini-sermons, most likely they will go somewhere other than a small group to meet that need. If facilitators find that the participants have a tendency to look to them for all the answers, they can deal with this potential problem by simply asking, “Can anyone help (name of participant) with that question?”

It should also be noted that the facilitator role occasionally involves helping participants evaluate their small-group experience during a meeting. This evaluation can be done by asking participants to respond to the following questions:

- What has been helpful or good about our shared experience thus far?
- What has not been helpful or what has been frustrating or hindering the process?
- Is there anything we can do to enrich the group experience?

The facilitator may need to encourage the participants to be honest in their evaluation of how the process is working. In one-to-one or group relationships, “being nice” and saying only what people want to hear may facilitate harmony, but it will also bring on stagnation. On the other hand, giving constructive criticism may be a risk; but where there is openness, this invariably brings about growth and improvement in the group process.

It would be wise for the facilitator to have the participants reflect on these characteristics of helpful and unhelpful participants after the opening prayer of the first session. It might also be helpful to review this section after a few sessions, particularly if some of the group seem to show evidence of being unhelpful participants.

In all circumstances, remember to pray.

HOW TO BE A GOOD PARTICIPANT

The degree of openness and participation by the members of a small group will determine to a great extent the quality of the experience for all the participants.

Participants will enrich a small-group process by:

- reading beforehand the assigned pages for each meeting in a prayerful and reflective manner
- sharing their thoughts, feelings, or personal experiences of the subject matter
- actively listening when other participants share their reflections
- encouraging and affirming participants who hesitate to share
- trying to keep the group focused on the topic
- offering an honest evaluation of the group process when invited to do so
- praying for the spiritual success and growth of the group

Participants will hinder and obstruct the small-group process by:

- failing to prepare the assignment for each meeting
- complaining and using the small-group discussion to air their pet peeves
- rambling and talking off the topic
- harshly criticizing the reflections of others
- dominating the discussion by acting as if they have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit
- offering only heady remarks and rarely, if ever, sharing a personal experience
- never participating in the sharing process

In all circumstances, remember to pray.