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## Tips for Facilitating Small Group Gatherings

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### WHAT SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED

- ***Start with prayer*** - Praying for our ministry means recognizing that the ministry is in God's hands, not ours. Pray incessantly for the Holy Spirit to offer you the guidance, passion and wisdom to facilitate your group's conversation.
- ***Put people at ease*** by establishing a comfortable atmosphere. Laughter can be an important tool in breaking down barriers. Tell a joke, use an icebreaker/game to help people relax.
- ***Review Small Group Guidelines & Expectations with participants*** - Setting expectations from the beginning with your small group participants is so important in avoiding many issues that could come up otherwise. (See last page for reference details).
- ***Create a safe environment***, where people feel free to honestly and openly express their thoughts without fear of judgment. Assure the participants that they're in a sacred space and nothing shared will go beyond there.
- ***Encourage relationship building***. This will help with bonding within the group and foster greater participation/discussion. Take a personal interest in your group. Remembering things they shared will show that you care and will encourage further openness.



- ***Treat all participants with respect and consideration.*** Discussion should be based on ideas and opinions, and not on personalities. Although you may disagree with someone else's viewpoint, it is important to remember that it is just as important as yours.
- ***Use encouraging body language and tone of voice.*** Lean forward when people are talking, for example, keep your body position open and approachable, and smile when appropriate. Showing that you're interested in what someone says, even in subtle ways, can break down barriers, especially for someone who may be on the quiet side.
- ***Give positive feedback*** for joining the discussion. Smile, repeat group members' points, and otherwise show that you value participation. A little encouragement can go a long way in enhancing a group's participation and in making your discussions more inclusive,
- ***Use open-ended questions*** and avoid the yes/no, true/false, multiple-choice questions—"Is Jesus the sheep or the shepherd in this parable?" By asking open-ended questions, you're promoting critical thinking skills beyond automatic responses. This also helps to prevent awkward silences.
- ***Ask follow-up questions*** like, "What makes you say that?", "How do you feel about that?", or "How would you explain your answer to a non-Christian friend or neighbor?" Follow-up questions enable the group to share insights based on their experiences, making for a deeper and richer discussion.
- ***It's OK to let the group know that you don't know all the answers.*** No one will think less of you; they may even respect you for your honesty. There is nothing wrong with saying something like, "I'm not really sure about that. Let me get back to you." Or, "I'll have to do some research on that, and then we can talk about it."
- ***Try to handle challenging participants***, such as the over-talker, the non-talker, the tangential participant, the know-it-all, and the insensitive person. Try to do this as early as possible before it makes the group uncomfortable. Although this can be difficult, it's best to address it as soon as possible to avoid future discomfort in the group.
- ***Make peace with silence.*** Many of us are uncomfortable with silence, but it is not always a bad thing. Avoid answering your own question, if possible. A general rule of thumb is to allow 8 seconds of silence before asking a different question (you'll almost never finish counting before someone speaks up). Having a co-leader can help break any uncomfortable silences. Talk to him/her and ask for ideas/suggestions on how to address this.

- ***Be aware of people's reactions and feelings***, and try to respond appropriately—If a group member is hurt by others' comments, seems puzzled or confused, is becoming angry or defensive, it's up to you, as the discussion leader, to use the ground rules or your own sensitivity to deal with the situation. Being aware of the reactions of individuals and of the group as a whole can make it possible to expose and use conflict, or to head off unnecessary emotional situations and misunderstandings. Try to avoid any hot-buttons issues or topics, like politics. These can derail a discussion and discourage future group participation.
- ***Find someone to help you lead a small group***. This is especially important if you've never led one before. If you're unsure who to ask, talk to a parishioner who's had leadership experience, or ask someone in the parish for help. If you are already a leader and feel someone might be a good leader in the future, ask him/her to be your co-leader for a small group. Being a mentor will help that person gain experience and develop the confidence to eventually lead their own small group.

## **WHAT SHOULD BE AVOIDED**

- ***Try not to interrupt***. Be an active listener while the person is talking rather than forming your response in your head. This could be especially problematic if you're a leader, because it could be interpreted by your group that you don't care what they think.
- ***Don't be the font of all wisdom***. This can discourage group members the chance to discuss the topic freely and without pressure. They may also have valuable ideas/insights ideas that you may not have considered. Model learning behavior, not teaching behavior. Remember that we're all here with a single purpose—to help each other grow in our faith journeys. Being a know-it-all will create a negative experience and could deter them from joining other groups in the future.
- ***Don't put people on the spot*** by saying things like, "Lisa, you've been really quiet the whole time," or making performance requests like, "Bob, let's have you read the next section of the report." Instead, make invitations for volunteers and let people engage when they are ready, so they don't feel put on the spot. Try to make your invitation less pointed. Use phrases like, "Who would like to do this week's reading?", or "Would anyone like to share their thoughts about that?" or "I would be interested to hear everyone's thoughts on that. Who would like to go first?"



- ***No preaching and teaching.*** Avoid giving unrequested advice within the group—"Well if I were you, I'd just do this ... ." That is one of the quickest ways to shut someone down from sharing. When you hear other group members start to do this, gently remind them that "this is a safe group, and we're here to listen, not to give advice." While our intentions may be good, it is best to remember that every individual handles their problems or differently. The best thing you can do is to just listen and be supportive by saying things like, "I know this may be difficult for you," or "I'm really sorry to hear that," or "I will pray for you."
- ***Don't let one or a small group of individuals dominate the discussion***—Be careful of those who may potentially control the conversation, including group's people who are particularly articulate or assertive, those who have strong feelings they urgently want to express, or people who simply feel the need –and have the ability–to dominate. Like the challenging participants mentioned previously, it is best to address this situation as soon as possible. After asking a question, you can say, "Maybe we can hear from someone who has wanted to share but hasn't yet." If it continues, then you may need to have a personal conversation with that person. Be polite, however. Start with a positive such as, "I really like that you're so enthusiastic about sharing," or "I really love the energy you bring to the group." Then, share your concern; be gentle by addressing the behavior and NOT the person. ("My concern is..." or "As a group, I think it's important to hear what everyone thinks.")
- ***Don't let one point of view override others.*** If a point of view dominates because of its merits and sensible to participants, that's what you want for a good group discussion. If a point of view dominates because of the aggressiveness of its supporters or is presented as something that's wrong to oppose ("People who disagree with the President are unpatriotic and hate their country"), that's is the opposite of an open discussion, and the leader should point it out when it happens. This can be another challenging participant. This situation is also more sensitive. If you have a co-leader, discuss ideas on how to best address it. It is probably best to address this with the person after the meeting or in private. This person may not realize what he or she is doing, and this conversation may turn things around. If the behavior continues you may need to have a stronger discussion on the negative environment he or she is creating. If your group is part of a larger ministry (like Alpha), you may want to ask the team their thoughts on how to handle this situation.

- ***Try to listen as much as possible.*** By and large, discussion groups are for the group members. As a leader, you have the right to be part of the discussion, but not dominate it. As a leader, your comments have more force than those of other group members, especially if you're viewed as an authority or expert. The more active you are in the discussion, the more the group may take your positions and ideas as "right," and the less it will come to its own conclusions. If necessary, have your co-leader fill in any gaps, so you can concentrate on listening to what's said, so you can ask follow-up questions.
- ***Control your own biases.*** Although you should point out factual errors or ideas that are inaccurate and disrespectful of others, you should not impose your views on the group, and should keep others from doing the same. Ultimately, group members should be asked to make rational decisions about the positions or views they want to agree with, based on those that make the most sense to them – whether they coincide with yours or not. Be mindful of giving/sharing your opinions, because they can sometimes interfere with open discussion and lead to confrontations.



# Small Group Resources

## Prayer

- The Power of Prayer for Supernatural Strength and Authority—  
<https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/the-strength-and-power-of-prayer.html>
- The Power of Prayer (With Bible Verses)—  
<https://paulechapman.com/2020/02/29/the-power-of-prayer-with-bible-verses/>
- Discernment Prayers—<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/discernment>
- Impactful, Purposeful Prayers for All Local Church Leaders—  
<https://iustdisciple.com/prayers-church-leaders/>

## Facilitation

- Small Group Guidelines and Expectations:  
<https://www.ndcarmel.com/documents/2021/12/Small%20Group%20Guidelines%20and%20Expectations-2.pdf>
- Facilitating Effective Group Discussions—  
<https://diversity.unl.edu/Resources/Facilitating%20Effective%20Group%20Discussions.pdf>
- 11 Ways to Facilitate Great Conversations—  
<https://coachingforleaders.com/facilitate-great-conversations/>
- Techniques for Leading Group Discussions—<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/group-discussions/main>
- Tips for Facilitating a Group Discussion—  
<https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2008/tips-for-facilitating-group-discussion.html>

## Leadership

- 10 Tips for Becoming a Better Leader—<https://www.verywellmind.com/ways-to-become-a-better-leader-2795324>
- How to Become a Great Leader: 10 Tips, 7 Traits, and 5 Challenges—  
<https://www.betterup.com/blog/being-a-leader>
- What Is Christian Leadership? 8 Principles—  
<https://online.campbellsville.edu/ministry/christian-leadership-principles/>
- 7 Ways to Be an Everyday Leader—[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/7-ways-to-be-an-everyday-leader\\_b\\_5922eb4fe4b07617ae4cbde0](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/7-ways-to-be-an-everyday-leader_b_5922eb4fe4b07617ae4cbde0)

# Praying

Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead you in all aspects of guiding small group conversations. Romans 8:26-27

Pray that God gives you vision and direction for your group. Proverbs 29:18

Pray that every person would become spiritually healthier as a result of participating in your small group experience. Ephesians 1:17

Pray that each one feels like they fit and connect with others in your group. Hebrews 10:25

Pray that the fruit of the Holy Spirit would increasingly manifest itself in the lives of every person in your group. Galatians 5:22-23

Pray that every person would be open to the move of the Holy Spirit in your midst. 1 Thessalonians 5:19

Pray that each person discovers their unique set of God-given gifts and is inspired to use them to strengthen our church family. 1 Corinthians 12:7

Pray that every person would be inspired to take one more step in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:6-7

Pray that each person grows in their confidence and ability to share their faith. 1 Peter 3:15



# Prayer for Parish Renewal



God of love,  
source of mercy and compassion,  
weave your dream for Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel  
into the fabric of our lives.

Give us a renewed commitment  
to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, our Savior,  
to our families, our neighbors, and those on the margins of life.

Help us to be you, Jesus, in welcoming and caring for all.

Holy Spirit, surround us with your love,  
fill us with your grace,  
and strengthen us for service in Jesus' name.

*Make us your missionary disciples!*

We ask this through the intercession of Mary,  
our Mother and Patroness.

Amen.