

## **Faith Sharing Sessions and the Role of the Facilitator**

Our sessions are times for sharing our faith and deepening our relationship with Jesus. The role of the facilitator is one of listening and encouraging by inviting group members to participate in the group's reflection and discussion. It is an important ministry to the community.

A facilitator, through respectful and sincere communication, helps the participants to stay focused by guiding the group toward its purpose and holding the group accountable for how it agrees to engage in the process.

Facilitating faith sharing is a ministry of service to the group that moves members to become more aware of their personal and communal experience of Jesus Christ in their lives. Group members bring a range of experiences and different stories, all of which the facilitator must value and honor.

The role of the facilitator is not to provide answers to personal faith questions participants might raise. Nor is a facilitator to be seen or experienced by participants as a teacher who instructs, as a judge who renders verdicts, or as a counselor who provides spiritual or moral guidance. During a session, probably the most important things a facilitator can and should do is listen carefully, encourage gently and do what is helpful for group members to share their reflections and stories.

A facilitator may experience some times of uncertainty, but they are not times to be feared. Though not meant to be exhaustive, here are some ways that may help a facilitator be more effective.

### **Personal Preparation**

- Spend some time reflecting on your motivations for doing this ministry and in prayer ask for what you need to be a good facilitator.
- Read or talk with someone about questions you have regarding how to deal with certain circumstances that might arise and about which you are anxious or unsure.
- Become familiar with the materials for the sessions. Determine how you would like the sessions to unfold, what questions from the materials to pose for consideration by the group if it becomes necessary and how much time to devote to each.

### **Help Participants Prepare**

- If you are able to briefly communicate with group members before your first session, please consider doing so by phone, note, or email, introducing yourself if necessary.

Express how much you are looking forward to being with them during these sessions; also review any details like where and when you are gathering, if they should bring anything, etc.

### **Some Ways to Start a Session**

- Consider having refreshments available if that is your custom. Arrange the space so people are facing each other making it conducive to sharing. Perhaps a lighted candle near a vase of flowers or a potted plant might warm the environment.
- Try to start (and end) on time as much as possible.
- Welcome everyone and begin with introductions, if necessary. Name tags might be helpful for the first meeting or two.
- After the welcome and introductions, invite members to be still and silent for a minute or two to center themselves and be mindful why they are gathered together. Follow this by praying the evangelization prayer together.
- In the first couple of sessions, review any ground rules such as the importance of maintaining confidentiality, trying to stay focused on the questions being considered, encouraging but not requiring everyone to share their thoughts to the degree desired, and being mindful that all sharing is very personal and that all stories are to be honored and respected.
- As facilitator, propose how you will proceed during your time together. Highlight or pose the question(s) to be considered if necessary, then facilitate the process, and enjoy the sharing.

### **Some Important Matters to Attend to During the Sessions**

One of the roles of a facilitator is to help clarify by a brief verbal explanation or by example, conduct that is appropriate for certain circumstances in a session.

- *Respect silence* especially when you and the group sense a particularly “sacred” moment; be still with it and don’t try to fill in with words or gestures. Trust yourself and the group to move when it is ready.
- *Be respectful of emotions.* Using your good judgment and usually without rushing, as facilitator, it might be helpful and appropriate simply to acknowledge the emotion(s) and its intensity. When it seems appropriate, the group typically responds.
- *If the discussion seems to be moving into a problem-solving mode,* as facilitator, interrupt and check in with the group to see if your intuition or observation is correct. Offer a simple reminder that the evangelization sessions are for sharing stories and experiences, not a time for members to solve an individual or group’s issues or problems.

- *If it is clear someone is off focus or quickly moving in that direction, gently interrupt and ask if the person is still considering the question the group is discussing. If not, kindly suggest and encourage the person to take up his/her focus or direction at some other time or in a different setting and then refer the group back to the question at hand.*
- *If it is not clear someone is moving off focus, be patient and calm. If much time is elapsing and it seems more desirable to continue considering the questions and the process the group agreed to, it may be necessary to ask the person to draw their comments to a close and then encourage others to pick up the conversation, returning to the guide questions or one closely aligned with them.*
- *If a group member has a tendency to dominate the conversation, seems to ramble on endlessly, or does not have the capacity to bring their thoughts to a close, it is appropriate and important for the facilitator to stop the person. Gently thank the person for his/her sharing and then make mention to the person that because of time limitations, you would like to see if other group members would like to share something and invite them to do so.*
- *If a person is very quiet and hardly ever talks, it is important for the facilitator to make a personal mental note of this. Though the facilitator may extend a simple, occasional invitation to speak, the facilitator should recognize that it is up to the person to respond and that the person's silence is okay and should not be construed as disinterest or non-involvement. Often a facilitator can approach the person after the meeting to ask how the person is doing and if there is anything he/she wants the facilitator to be aware of.*

### **Some Ways to Close a Session**

- About ten minutes before the closing time agreed to by the group, make the members aware that you are moving toward the end of your time together for the session and invite a few more comments.
- About five minutes before the closing time, ask for any closing reflections or comments members might want to make about their time together.
- In drawing your time together to an end, thank everyone for their participation. Remind them of where and when the next session will be held and encourage them to continue and deepen their reflection around this session's questions and discussion. Finally, ask them to look over the materials for the next gathering prior to that session, if possible.

### **Learning from Our Experiences**

- At some point, but not during the sessions themselves, you may want to receive some feedback from group members about your effectiveness as facilitator. A conversation

with a group member(s) whom you trust to give you honest and constructive feedback might be very helpful.

- If there are clear issues you can identify, seek out advice from someone you know who is experienced at facilitating and ask for their opinion or counsel.
- Seek out and refer to helpful reading materials for more information and perspective:
  - “Celebrating Being a Facilitator of a Small Faith Group Process: Ideas for the Journey,” by Theresa Zlotkowski: a more developed article articulating the spiritual aspects as well some practical insights into the ministry of facilitation
  - “Do’s and Don’ts: Facilitating a Small Group,” by Donna L. Ciangio: A brochure available through the National Pastoral Life Center, 18 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012-2404, (212) 431-7825
  - Others that might be suggested by your pastor or another experienced facilitator.

The ministry of facilitation is a service to the community. Persons who facilitate these faith sharing sessions bring different levels of knowledge and experience to this ministry. Through personal preparation that examines motivation and includes prayer, along with learning certain techniques, a person can grow in confidence in time in this important and necessary ministry. It is one that is appreciated by group members for it frees them to give their full attention to the task at hand. In the Evangelization Initiative, that task is to share and come to appreciate more deeply our individual and communal stories and experiences of Jesus.

Through the exercise of this ministry of facilitation you will help to make Jesus Christ known and loved in our time.