

Remote Facilitation

Online Small Groups

Thank you for your willingness to help lead your group during this time of pandemic and isolation. During this time of physical distancing, small group faith sharing is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Many people are feeling lonely and isolated with a dramatic reduction of in-person interactions. It is more important than ever to connect, and technology can help us to hold each other in community and be an important way to provide pastoral care.

However, many of us are new to connecting in this way, so hosting virtual meetings can be intimidating. They also come with their own unique challenges.

You Can Do This!

As a church leader, technology may not be your “thing.” That’s okay. You do not have to be the one to figure out the technical details. Your job is to make the invitations and connections.

Members of your parish have had to figure out how to use online video conferencing for connecting with family members, work responsibilities, their child’s school, or other reasons. It is very likely that at least one member of any small group you would form will be able to take on the technology piece for you.

If you do not already have the technology expertise personally or within your staff, we suggest that you set that aside and begin by making small group invitations. Once you have willing participants, begin by asking if any of them is willing and able to host the meetings. Otherwise, ask your broader community for help.

Video Conferencing Platforms

There are a number of free or low-cost tools for video conferencing. A member of the group most likely can host all other members for free, without you having to be involved.

If you are seeking out a platform yourself, there are many online articles that can help you. Simple do a web search for “best free video conferencing.” Zoom (<http://zoom.us>) is one of the most popular options for hosting meetings and has a free tier.

Tips for Facilitation by Video

It will be important to think through how the meetings will be facilitated remotely. Here are some recommendations.

- **Group size.** Generally, we would suggest aiming for a group size of up to about eight participants. If you have much more than this number interested, simply form additional groups.
- **Scheduling.** Small faith sharing groups typically meet once a week. It may make sense for groups sharing in this particular experience to meet more frequently: twice a week or even more often. Ask the participants what they would prefer.
- **Facilitator.** A parish staff member does not have to be a part of each group (although it could be very helpful to them and insightful to the leader). It would be important to have a meeting facilitator who can be especially welcoming, coordinate, and step in as needed.
- **Tech facilitator.** It may be helpful to have a separate technology facilitator who can help folks if they run into trouble. Share the phone number of this person before the meeting so they can call if they have trouble joining, turning on their microphone, etc.

- **The value of video.** Not all participants may have a camera or be willing to use it. That is certainly not required, although it can help the group feel more connected and provide visual cues.
- **Getting voices into the circle.** This small group process uses a “round table” methodology, in which the written material is read out loud by the participants during the meeting, one paragraph at a time. We have learned that this process brings all of the voices into the circle early on and makes participants more comfortable to share later on. This is even more important when we are meeting through screens.
- **One voice at a time.** Think a bit beforehand about how you can help the group from talking over each other. If the group is small enough and there is little audio delay, you may not have to do anything. However, if it becomes a problem, one leader could be responsible for calling on speakers one at a time. Participants could raise their hands (if on video) or type in a chat box if they would like to speak.

Before the Sessions

- **Distribute the handouts.** We recommend that you send the small group handouts to your participants well beforehand by email or postal mail. Some participants may not have a way to print out the materials from their computer, and it may be difficult for them to read off their screen if it is filled with the video conferencing app. One other option could be to have the facilitator screen share, showing the talking points to all.
- **Review the standard guidelines.** Be sure to also cover the guidelines found on the next page.

After the Sessions

- **Next steps.** Once the group has covered the material in this process, check in to see if they have interest in continuing to meet. Extra meetings could be unstructured, or you could use one of our many other downloadable small group series at <https://pastoral.center/small-group-eresources>. In particular, consider *Grandparenting with Grace* or even the retreat for senior adults *The Best Is Yet to Be*.

Facilitating the Sessions

The simple format of the sessions allows them to be led without the help of a staff person. However, it would be helpful to have one or more volunteer facilitators who welcome participants, track the time, and help ensure that everyone has a chance to share.

Here are some tips for leading the group:

- ① **Be welcoming and hospitable.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or new to participating in your parish/faith formation events. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome. If you go first, you might model a short introduction such name, age (group is for elders!), whether you live with family or in a retirement center.
- ② **Review the group conversation guidelines** (see below) at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Make sure everyone feels comfortable in the group.
- ③ **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role for helping everyone feel included.
- ④ **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to begin the discussion. You can prompt people, but we recommend that you try something called the “popcorn” method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity. Don’t ever put people on the spot by compelling them to share. Let people know that, at times, it’s absolutely fine to listen attentively and not feel they need to respond.
- ⑤ **Listen to feedback** from the group along the way. Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.
- ⑥ **Encourage the group to read the content aloud** rather than silently. An excellent way to get everyone's voices heard early on is to use the “round table” format. Simply have each participant read one paragraph. This paves the way for sharing: often once people have broken the ice and spoken in the circle, it’s easier for them to further participate. If someone does not wish to read, the next person goes ahead.

Small Group Guidelines

Ground Rules

Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

1. **Confidentiality.** What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
2. **Start on time—and end on time.** Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
3. **Conversation involves everyone.** Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. Invite the extroverts, who are comfortable speaking most thoughts, to hold back from sharing a second time until everyone has been heard. At the same time, don't pressure anyone to share. There may be times when people just prefer to listen.
4. **Respect each other.** All perspectives are worthwhile. Avoid dismissing, making fun of, or judging anyone's thoughts and experiences. Share from your own life experience and speak for yourself. Don't problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do. Certainly share what you have found helpful, but without the assumption that everyone has to follow your approach.
5. **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's human nature to have different opinions. (Best to stay away from politics!) There's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and experiences. Even though we share a common destination as the People of God, each person is on a unique journey.
6. **Turn off mobile phones** before the group begins! Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time to be fully present to others.

There is a magic about group process. Participants are offered an opportunity to talk about topics that may not be open to discussion anywhere else. People often ask us how we are, but we find few occasions to speak what's in our heart in a trusting environment.

Leader Guidelines

Thank you for being willing to help lead your group and make this a great experience for everyone!

Here are some things to keep in mind as you do so:

1. **Ensure good hospitality.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or the larger community. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
2. **Go over the ground rules** at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Some of the material is challenging, since it explores how the Gospel challenges us to change our lives. Make sure that the ground rules are followed so everyone feels comfortable in the group.
3. **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group. You can apologize in advance for such interruptions when reviewing the ground rules with the group. However, don't put people on the spot by compelling them to share.
4. **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to initiate. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the "popcorn" method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity.
5. **Listen to the feedback from the group along the way.** Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.