

Faith-Sharing Communities Toolbox

Faith-sharing communities allow us to share our faith with others and to grow together in community. Using prayer, shared experiences, and explorations of faith, small groups can create in a smaller setting a community that enhances the life of the entire parish.

Structure of a Small Group

This is determined by the group. Here are two examples:

Type 1: Structured around a teaching/learning focus or a common ministry

- Teaching/learning: read and discuss the Sunday Readings; read and discuss a faith based book, watch a formation program such as Bishop Robert Barron's Catholicism Series
- Common ministry: when gathered share stories of the impact the ministry has made on your faith walk; pray for each other; pray for those you serve

Type 2: Centered on building relationships with God through each other. Less structured. God made us brothers and sisters in Christ. Living that relationship naturally encourages faith, for we become like the people we associate with.

Group Facilitator

Are you called to be a facilitator of a faith-sharing community? The facilitator doesn't need to be particularly knowledgeable about the subject matter, but should be aware of how to guide small discussion groups. The Facilitator must be willing to share their understanding of what the faith means in their life and encourage others in the group to do the same.

Generally, here is what the facilitator will be expected to do:

- Encourage participation and the sharing of faith
- Encourage prayer
- Create an atmosphere of hospitality and trust among the participants
- Remind members of the dates of meetings and locations
- Start and stop meeting on time
- Work to give everyone a chance to share
- Keep group on topic if there is one, (unless the Holy Spirit is leading the group elsewhere.)

And here is what a facilitator is NOT:

- A theologian – Theologians, of course, may belong to or lead small faith-sharing groups. But it is not a requirement. If theological questions arise, turn to your parish's pastor or to a university theologian, or to the various Vatican and USCCB online resources for such questions.
- A counselor – A faith-sharing community is not an appropriate setting in which to handle emotionally intense feelings such as depression, anxiety, or extreme anger. If a group member moves in this direction, the facilitator should bring the discussion back to faith-sharing.

Recommended Faith-sharing Community Guidelines

These suggested guidelines should be reviewed with the group at the first meeting and whenever new members join the group. If there is a particular group sharing difficulty that emerges, you may wish to reiterate a point or two from these guidelines at the beginning of a subsequent meeting.

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- Set a definite beginning time and an ending time. In order to keep with the allotted time, it may be helpful to assign a timekeeper.
- Make sure that no one dominates the sharing time. You may wish to decide in advance and as a group the maximum amount of time that can reasonably be allotted for each person's sharing, in order to allow time for each person to share (if they choose to do so.)
- Use the faith-sharing questions to keep the sharing on track. If someone drifts off onto a tangent (such as a "life philosopher" or a "spokesperson for world issues"), ask the question again or ask, "Now, how were you connecting that to the original question?" Or, "Could you summarize that into a sentence or two?"
- Observe confidentiality. What is said in the group stays in the group!
- Be as concrete as possible in your responses to the faith-sharing questions. Avoid "I always ...," "I never ...," "My folks always taught me to" Encourage specifics by asking "Has there ever been a time when you ...?" or "Could you give us a (small) example of that?"
- Show respect for one another. No criticism or judgment.
- A Type 1 group that is focused on a formation program or a ministry may not be the place to focus on personal problems unrelated to the faith sharing questions. However, personal intentions can be included in the closing prayer. A Type 2 group is more open to sharing blessings and challenges of its participants. However caution should be taken to not try and fix the issues. The group gathers to support and pray for each other. "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.: (Romans 12: 15).
- The members of the group do not need to respond to another person's sharing. Keep in mind this is the lived experience of this person and may present a different point of view. This view is to be respected. Group members should be encouraged to simply silently reflect on it and then share for themselves. Encourage the use of "I" statements and not "We," "You," "Our," etc.
- Usually each person responds only once to each question so that others have an opportunity to share.
- Do not interrupt or cross talk (person A is speaking, and person B starts speaking to person C) while sharing is taking place.
- Silence is a vital part of faith-sharing. Be comfortable with it.
- Encourage sharing by everyone but do not insist that they share.
 - The facilitator may address each group member with an invitation to share, even if the response is only to say "I pass." As the group gets better acquainted, this may not be necessary.

Faith-sharing Community Size

Typically, groups number 6 to 9 in size. With fewer than 6, you may not develop the diversity in viewpoints and perspectives that enliven reflections. With more than 9, you may not have enough time for all to share in ways that are most comfortable for them — and you may limit the spaces where you can meet. But there is no hard-and-fast rule on group size. You may need to adjust a group's size up or down depending on the dynamics of that particular group.

Times and Locations for Meetings

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Each group sets its own day/time/place for meeting. Keep in mind, that space is limited at church on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings during the school year at church.

If you want to meet at Church:

- Schedule all meetings through Kathy Ahearn. She will reserve the space. Notify her of any schedule changes.
- Please inform us if technology is needed- this will help determine the space to be used.
- If Virginia Beach Public Schools have cancelled their activities due to inclement weather, assume that the church building will be closed as well.
- Arrange seating to allow for everyone to see and hear.
- Please leave the room/space as you found it
- Depending on space used, materials may be stored in the room. Please contact Janet Jones for more info.

Meeting at a Home:

- The environment should be conducive to faith-sharing.
- Arrange seating to allow for everyone to see and hear. Adequate lighting is essential.
- The group may wish to consider rotating host sites.
- You may ask participants to take turns each week to bring refreshments.
 - Consider having refreshments available at the beginning of the gathering or midway through the group time (perhaps just before beginning to answer the faith-sharing questions.) This may cultivate a more comfortable, informal tone to the sharing. By not delaying refreshments until the end, participants are more likely to go home at a respectable hour.
 - Your group may wish to dispense entirely with refreshments.

Faith-sharing Community Interests

The primary interest must be to share our faith in our lives. This guide is based on using the *Exploring Sunday Readings*. Other programs/resources can be used. The structure of the meeting can be modified based on the specific program recommendations. Check with Religious Formation office for programs that are available to be used.

Suggested Guidelines for Type 1 meetings

Note: This guideline is entirely optional. You are free to conduct your small group the way the group wants.

Conducting the meeting itself requires some planning, of course, and some idea of an appropriate structure or format. A structured approach is especially important at the beginning.

The following guide is a general format for a small faith-sharing group: (Schedule based on using Exploring the Sunday Readings)

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Opening Prayer (5 minutes) and Song (optional)
- Read the Sunday Readings (5-10 minutes)
- Silent Reflection (3 minutes)
- Main Focus: Reading or Commentary for This Session (10-15 minutes)

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- Silent Reflection (3 minutes)
- Sharing Thoughts and Experiences on the questions (30-40 minutes)
- Closing Reflection (5-10 minutes on a Scripture reading, devotional excerpts, etc.)
- Living Our Faith – ways to bring our faith into our daily lives in the coming weeks (10 minutes)
Closing Prayer or Song (5 minutes)
- Light refreshments and social conversation, to build community (as much time as appropriate)

This schedule will differ based on program that is being used. Other structures may work just as well. What's important is to find an overall structure that works for your group but which you may adjust as needed — don't sacrifice the group's needs for a rigid structure; be flexible. Whichever format you follow, however, try to provide an appropriate balance among prayer, reflection, and sharing.

Suggested Guidelines for Type 2 meetings

Note: This guideline is entirely optional. You are free to conduct your small group the way the group wants.

Meeting Times and length should be agreed upon by the group.
The format of what is being shared should be agreed upon by the group.

A basic template for the gathering:

- Gather
- Share
- Discuss based on a agreed topic, book, DVD
- Offer needs up of the participants.
- Pray for these needs