

Starting a Small Faith-Sharing Group

Prepared by

The Voice of Renewal/Lay Education National Working Group

How to Start and Structure Small Faith-Sharing Groups

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

The suggestions that follow come from various guides and descriptions of small faith-sharing groups and from the experiences of the members of our Voice of Renewal/Lay Education Working Group — most notably the experiences of Bill Murphy, who has helped start numerous such groups.

This particular guide uses the example of a small group gathered to read Scriptures. But a small group may form around other faith-sharing practices as well: for example, reading texts about Catholic actions in the world and discerning how to put the practices into daily lives, or studying devotional readings, or examining how particular Church teachings apply in the modern world.

Where to Start

Begin by organizing a parish event that attracts as many parishioners as possible. This event could be a mission, a parish retreat, a lecture series, or perhaps a discussion series during Advent or Lent. Or you could suggest to the organizer of such an event that they consider working towards developing small faith-sharing groups as a conclusion to the current program.

Whatever approach you select for the initiating event, your aim is to create a common spiritual experience and bond that ends with an offer to continue that experience through small faith-sharing groups.

Most people will not take you up on this offer. Schedules are tight; other commitments abound. But do not be discouraged. By hosting the parish event, you already have succeeded: by gathering Christians together to think and pray about their faith. If you can attract 5% to 10% of those attendees to a continuing group, you are doing well. It's also better to start small!

When you ask people about continuing with a small faith-sharing group, be sure to get a commitment: sign people up — if not for the group itself, at least to be contacted in the future about a group. (“I’ll think about it” is not a positive response.)

Structuring the Small Faith-Sharing Groups

Organizing into small faith-sharing groups requires balancing several factors: the number of leaders available, the size of the group, the time available for people in the group, the interests of the people, and the materials available.

Group Leaders

Identify some people who can act as leaders of the small groups. The leaders don't need to be particularly knowledgeable about the Bible, but they **SHOULD** have some training in how to guide small discussion groups, and they **MUST** be willing to share their understanding of what the Scriptures (or your overall topic) mean in their lives and to encourage others in the group to do the same.

Generally, here is what the small group leader will be expected to do:

- ❑ Encourage participation and the sharing of faith
- ❑ Encourage communal prayer (singing, too, if possible) and a prayerful atmosphere at meetings
- ❑ Encourage participants to live out their faith commitments in daily actions
- ❑ Create an atmosphere of hospitality and trust among the participants

And here is what a Group Leader 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 – Small faith-sharing groups are 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 leader should bring the discussion back to faith-sharing.

Group 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 for Meetings

Each group sets its own time for meeting — a time that is convenient for all members. For example, a group with pre-school children may find morning meetings best while lunch time is convenient for those who all work in the same geographical area. Evening meetings also are common for those who work.

Most groups meet once a month for 90 minutes (plus a social half-hour or so around coffee and light refreshments after the meeting). This provides enough time for sharing but is not overly burdensome for those with other responsibilities.

Group Interests

The primary interest must be to share our faith in our lives. But the discussion of that interest can take many forms and also can take on secondary interests: women's groups, men's groups, young persons, senior citizens, divorced people, grieving people, gay and lesbian people, or any other characteristics that bind a particular group of people in their Christianity. Or you could gather a mixture of people all from the same parish.

ONE CAVEAT: If clergy or religious belong to a group, they must be especially careful not to present themselves as “experts” in the faith. In a small faith-sharing group setting, clergy and religious are just faithful members like all others of the group.

Materials Needed

Scripture-based groups may be among the easiest to start because the Bible and numerous Bible discussion aids are readily available. But faith-sharing groups are not just Bible study groups. To obtain a broader sense of faith-sharing — especially if your group does not focus directly on the Bible — you may prefer to start out with some material designed specifically for small groups. These are two helpful ones:

At Home with the Word by Liturgy Training Publications (Archdiocese of Chicago, www.ltp.org, telephone 1-800-933-1800)

Quest, A Reflection Booklet for Small Christian Communities (www.sccquest.org, 1-860-243-9642).

If your group focuses on a spiritual book or readings as the source of faith-sharing, rather than the Bible, each member also will need access to that book or to the readings.

Also give some thought to the space used for the faith-sharing group. An inviting, warm environment is just as important as the hospitality extended among the members. The setting should be intimate enough that a group of 6 to 9 is not “lost” in vast spaces, yet large enough that individual personal spaces are not forcibly violated simply because you are sitting “one atop another.”

Guidelines for the Meetings

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:

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Opening Prayer (5 minutes) and Song (optional)
- Relevant Scripture Reading (5-10 minutes)
- Silent Reflection (3 minutes)
- Main Focus: Reading or Commentary for This Session (10-15 minutes)
- Silent Reflection (3 minutes)
- Sharing Thoughts and Experiences on the Main Focus (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)

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.

Also assume that the group's first meeting will be slightly longer than the usual time period — perhaps two hours instead of 90 minutes — so that you can meet each other, review the general structure, set up meeting dates, and review guidelines.

Guidelines for Participation

As noted in the meeting guidelines, silence (“silent reflection”) is an essential part of the faith-sharing experience. Silence also is important within each element of the meeting structure. Silence creates a reflective and unhurried atmosphere. It allows those less reticent to gather their courage and speak. It may serve at the start of each session as a way to focus thoughts on the gathering itself, away from the day’s previous activities.

Here are some additional guidelines you may wish to distribute at your first meeting:

- ❑ Respect each person and their contribution. Faith-sharing is not problem-solving, debate, or literary analysis. It is a shared encounter along our individual spiritual journeys.
- ❑ Each person shares on the level where he or she is most comfortable.
- ❑ Try to speak with honesty and openness to enhance the community’s growth.
- ❑ Before sharing a second time, wait to be sure that all have had a chance to share a first time.
- ❑ Confidentiality is essential. What is shared within the group remains within the group.
- ❑ Silence is important to the process. Allow for reflections and for time to think before speaking.
- ❑ There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. Indeed, there are no “answers” in faith-sharing – just a prayerful attention to the action of God in our midst.

Additional Information

For additional information on starting and running a small faith-sharing group, contact Bill Murphy at jbzmurphy@rcn.com.