

Home is a Holy Place

Guidance for Small Group Facilitators

Introduction - These brief notes should help you facilitate a conversation about marriage and family life in your home or parish. Each suggestion, pointer and reminder is developed much more fully in a document you can download from the *Home is a Holy Place* website.

Context – The conversation will focus on the questions contained in the *Home is a Holy Place* groupsheet materials. We suggest that you set aside two hours for this and invite around 8-12 people to participate.

Fundamentals

- * The Naming of Experience – The *Home is a Holy Place* conversations are primarily concerned with the sharing of experience. They are not problem solving exercises but rather opportunities to name and tentatively explore the life, love and activity of God in families' lives.
- * Of Conversation – Talking about marriage and family life might be difficult for some people because it tends to evoke strong emotions. It will help if you can establish a way of relating in which participants feel safe and comfortable. A true 'conversation' provides such a context. You will be encouraging group members both to share their life experience and to listen sensitively and without judgement to that of others – even though it may be very different from their own. The exchange is not a 'discussion', which is essentially combative; it is the thoughtful sharing of insight between those seeking understanding and communion.
- * Why Facilitation? – Experience suggests that conversation in small groups is a fragile plant, which needs a good deal of care and attention. It is the role of the 'facilitator' to help it to flourish. The word comes from the Latin '*facilis*' meaning 'easy'. A facilitator is someone who tries to make it easy for others to successfully accomplish what they set out to do – in this case to share their experience of family life at home, in the world and in the Church.

Creating Environments

- * Preparation of Place – The atmosphere in a group, while heavily dependent on the way people treat each other, is also influenced by the physical surroundings in which the conversation takes place. It would be very helpful if you can prepare a warm and comfortable setting for the conversation and make it sacred by a symbolic representation of the spiritual and family dimension to the gathering.
- * Negotiation with the Group – You can help participants to feel relaxed and secure by establishing agreement between them about a number of issues before you start. You should check that the group are clear about:
 - Why they are meeting.*
 - How they will proceed.*
 - How they will try and relate to each other.*

(This negotiation will specifically address concerns about confidentiality, appropriate levels of self-disclosure and the avoidance of personal criticism) This is also the moment to distribute the sheet Help... When Life Hurts.

- * Care for Participants – While these conversations are designed to explore marital and family spirituality, the way in which they are undertaken is more important. While you should not feel responsible for the group as a whole, you should always be looking to care for, encourage and affirm each person, especially those who appear vulnerable.

Group Process – To help you manage the conversation relatively smoothly and safely we suggest the following seven-stage process, which is explained in more detail on the website.

Preparation

Prayer (prior to meeting)
Preparation of the Space

Welcome and Prayer

Welcome and "How are you?"
Shared Silence and Opening Prayer

Negotiation

(See above)

Stimulus and Reflection

Stimulus Questions
Time alone for Individual Reflection

Sharing and Conversation

The Sharing of Experience
Conversation

Review and Prayer

Looking Back
Shared Silence and Closing Prayer

Preparing to Depart

Cup of Tea or Coffee
Informal chat

The Facilitative Role

- * A Way of Being in Groups – You should, first and foremost, 'model' an appropriate way of relating to others – behaving in such a way as to encourage others: to accept one another regardless of the quality of their contribution; to listen with empathy to personal testimony from outside their own experience; to hold each person in the highest regard, including those to whom they would not ordinarily be drawn.
- * Not an Expert – You should not present yourself as 'an expert' about the issues under consideration. You are simply a participant with particular extra responsibilities - to set a tone of welcome and acceptance; to make sure that the whole process is satisfactorily completed in the time available; to intervene to protect the interpersonal boundaries already negotiated in advance.
- * Intervention – Apart from moving the group from one stage to another, with suitable words of introduction and explanation, you should be slow to intervene. But you should be ready and prepared to, however, if the group gets into difficulties. Examples might include: when someone is speaking for too long; the conversation drifts towards argument; someone is openly criticised; someone wants to speak and is not given the opportunity. These interventions should be undertaken calmly and in a good humoured way.

Referrals and Support - Every facilitator needs back up in the form of access to others who are able to offer help and support should it be required. Your Diocesan Co-ordinator should be available but you may wish to have your own local contacts. These would also include the names and contact details of counsellors and other therapists to whom individuals could be referred should it be necessary.

Facilitator's Checklist

It might be helpful for you to use this checklist as part of your preparation.

Preparation

Personal – Prior to facilitation of this kind it is important to actively consider where you are personally.

- ⇒ *Is this a good time for you to be facilitating this group, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually?*
- ⇒ *Have there been any related events in your life, which are still sensitive areas for you and still need addressing?*
- ⇒ *Can you foresee any potential areas that may cause you to become unsettled and inhibit your role as a facilitator?*

Co-facilitation – Working with someone else allows facilitators to reflect on their input and practice.

- ⇒ *Who would be most helpful to work with you?*
- ⇒ *What skills, qualities and knowledge are needed to balance your own?*

Remote – Anything you need to prepare beforehand.

- ⇒ *How are you going to make the working space as comfortable and relaxed as possible?*
- ⇒ *What kind of central focus will you prepare to symbolically echo the material the group will be considering?*
- ⇒ *Are you properly conversant with the questions the group are going to consider?*
- ⇒ *Have you a clear understanding of the nature of conversation?*
- ⇒ *What methodology will you use in the group?*
- ⇒ *Have you remembered to pray about the group and your facilitative role?*

Proximate

- ⇒ *Have you left enough time to properly prepare?*
- ⇒ *Is the room ready, as you would like it?*
- ⇒ *Have you all the material you will need, leaflets, pens, prayers etc?*
- ⇒ *How about refreshments?*

Delivery

Welcome and Prayer

- ⇒ *Do you need to prepare a prayer for use at the beginning?*

Negotiation

⇒ *What boundaries do you need to establish for the group?*

Stimulus and Reflection

⇒ *Will it be possible for people to 'get away' from each other to reflect?*

⇒ *Are you sure about the timing of everything?*

Sharing and Conversation

⇒ *How will you remain engaged, fulfilling your role but retaining your personal integrity?*

⇒ *In what ways will you support those who may find some things uncomfortable?*

⇒ *How will you make sure everyone has a chance to contribute?*

⇒ *What methods of conflict resolution will you use?*

⇒ *How will you deal with emphatic or intransigent positions?*

Review and Prayer

⇒ *Have you someone in mind who will feedback to the diocesan conversation?*

Preparing to Depart

⇒ *Have you prepared a final prayer?*

Evaluation

Of the Meeting

⇒ *How do you feel everything was received?*

⇒ *Did people feel able to contribute honestly?*

⇒ *Have you a record of key ideas to feedback to the diocese?*

Of yourself

⇒ *How did you find the whole experience?*

⇒ *What have you learned about facilitation that would be useful to you in the future?*

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