

# FAITH-SHARING GROUPS GUIDELINES



## SACRED STORY INSTITUTE

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## SACRED STORY COMMUNITY

### **For Use with Sacred Story Community weekly meetings<sup>1</sup>**

The following guidelines are offered to help leaders better facilitate the weekly meetings for Sacred Story Community. The facilitator is the one to convenes the meeting and helps keep it on track. But all members should familiarize themselves with these guidelines as all adult members of a Sacred Story Community are co-responsible for the health and well-being of keeping the meetings and the community on topic and on track.

### **Structure and Purpose of Small Groups:**

Faith-sharing groups provide an occasion for members to share and learn from others in dealing with real-life issues. These groups provide sacred space to listen to others' experience and to speak one's own heart and mind. The opportunity may arise, if time permits, for members to engage each other in discussion and questions. However, the primary purpose is to listen - to one's own heart and to the hearts of others.

The format we have found most fruitful for these groups is based loosely on a Quaker-style meeting. In these, reverence for the individual is primary. Everyone sits together in gentle silence until someone feels inspired to speak. The person so inspired speaks while others listen. There is no rebuttal or response. The statement stands as an expression of that person's faith and experience. Until someone else feels moved to speak, the group will sit in silence once more. It is a different way of paying attention to what someone has to say. Often, when someone speaks, we stop listening and begin formulating our response to them before they have even stopped speaking. With the option of immediate response removed, we are afforded the opportunity to simply listen—to God, others and our own hearts.

Leaders are present in the groups to participate fully in the listening as well as to offer their own reflections. They are also there to facilitate the process so that everyone has the chance to speak. Because this format may not be familiar to everyone, here are some guidelines to help the process go smoothly:

### **Getting Settled**

#### **GIVE AN OVERVIEW:**

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<sup>1</sup> These guidelines are adapted from my thirty years of retreat work and can benefit almost any faith-reflection group format.

Upon starting a new group, people will most likely be a little nervous. To ease the tension, take a short period of time to settle. Ask everyone to get comfortable. Allow a few minutes and then explain that the time together will fall into three parts (listening, comment, and prayer). Explain what each of these parts entail and the expected time-frame. With groups of 5-8 people, it takes at least 40 minutes to engage all three parts of the process.

### **SET YOUR TIME:**

We strongly suggest limiting your gathering to no more than one hour. Whatever amount of time you choose, reassure the group that you are tracking the time so they do not need to be concerned. At the start of each gathering, take three to five minutes for silent reflection on the theme you will be discussing today. It is best if the overall program coordinator can restate the focus of reflection/sharing, to ensure that it is clear to everyone in the group. This will save time and improve the group process for everyone.

Before any one speaks, we recommend taking about three to five minutes of quiet time for participants to listen to their hearts in light of the theme. Silence is a very powerful prayer medium. The leader should explain this process clearly and manage the time for the group, announcing when the three to five minutes have ended.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Make it clear from the start that what is said in the small group is sacred and is not to be shared outside the group. Ask the members of the group to agree to keep confidential what is shared in the group. This needs to be a solemn pledge. As a leader, it is important to set an environment of trust and confidentiality. Let people know that this time is for them to say what they think and feel, without worrying about judgment or being discussed with a third party. This is a private time just for this group.

### **SPEAK OUT OF THE "I":**

Invite those sharing to speak out of their own experience. Instead of projecting feelings and thoughts to the general "you" as in "you know when you feel like..," encourage people to own their feelings and thoughts. You may remind the individuals in the group to say: "I believe; I think; I feel," etc. It can take one or two small groups before people catch on to this speaking out of the personal "I".

### **ANXIETY:**

It is natural for there to be some initial anxiety in the group. People may not know each other or may be nervous because they do not know what to expect. I have two suggestions to ease this

tension. First, be open and honest about how you are feeling. This tends to quickly put people at ease. You might mention that you are nervous because you have never facilitated a group like this before. Second, let people know the full small group structure. This helps remove the fear of the unknown. I recommend inviting their cooperation by asking; “does that sound that okay?” after explaining what is to happen next. Asking for input and participation helps individuals accept ownership of the group experience.

## **Part One: Reflections/Listening**

### **ONE AT A TIME:**

After initial five minutes of silent reflection conclude, explain that the first part of the time is for everyone to share his or her reflections on the particular theme. Mention that there is no particular order to follow and that everyone should speak when they feel comfortable.

- ✘ People should speak one at a time
- ✘ People should not interrupt each other
- ✘ Ask that each individual say when he or she is finished

To ensure everyone has a chance to speak if they wish, no one person should speak for longer than four or five minutes. If there is time remaining at the end, there can be a second go around with perhaps a two minute per-person guideline.

### **ALLOWING REFLECTIONS TO STAND ALONE:**

During this first part, people should not comment on or offer advice in response to others. The experience of being listened to without comment or judgment is often a rare gift. In this group situation, a space is created where the primary purpose is to listen to each other.

### **BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE:**

Everyone should be invited to speak his or her own mind and conscience. However, no one in the group should feel obligated or forced to speak. There will inevitably be some awkward silences because this type of gathering is different from everyday conversation. Do not let it bother you. It is normal. Ask people to say “pass” or a similar phrase to indicate that they do not wish to speak. Leaders must never be afraid of silence in a group. It is much better to be silent together while waiting for someone to speak than it is to fill up the silence with chatter. There is nothing wrong with silence. Leaders need never feel as though they are doing something wrong if people are not speaking.

### **SOME CHOOSE TO LISTEN AND NOT SPEAK:**

There is a possibility that some will choose not to talk. There could be many reasons for this. Be

sensitive to those who may want to speak but may be shy initially. Others may not have the capacity to quickly articulate their thoughts or experiences. The introverts in the group might need more time to get to the point of speaking. The extroverts might need to take less time speaking to allow this. You will find the right balance.

### **EMOTIONAL INTENSITY:**

If someone shares a reflection that is particularly thoughtful or emotional, allow some additional time for that reflection to be absorbed. Remember that a powerful reflection can make some participants feel that they don't have anything important to contribute (similar to the dynamic when someone says something brilliant and ends the discussion for everyone). People are at different points in their lives and need to know that they have the freedom in this group to be exactly where they are. The most important thing to keep in mind is to ask if everyone who wanted to speak had the opportunity to do so before concluding part two.

### **ADVICE GIVING**

The group time is not an occasion to give unsolicited advice to other group members. Individuals grow when they are able to listen to the real hopes and dreams of other others in the group and can share this in the safety and comfort of a "community" setting. People who constantly want to offer advice are often individuals who should instead focus on their own needs and concerns. Trying to be the specialist and "fixer" of others will not create a healthy group dynamic, but create disruptions. It will harm both the group and the individual who practices this type of intervention. This form of engaging in a group is appropriate for some group settings but not with our model of faith sharing and community.

### **PART TWO: COMMENT**

When everyone has been given the opportunity to say something, open discussion and comments can take place. If so inclined, the group leader can make some personal observations about what the members of the group shared and can also say what he or she experienced in listening to others. People should be invited to offer comments and observations on the reflections and experiences that they just heard. But this is not a time to offer unsolicited advice to other group members. Some might also want to augment their own reflections at this time.

People can also ask questions. This is the least important part of the group, however, because this type of conversation can happen easily outside the group. If there is a great deal of time left after the Reflections/Listening, it may be a good idea to take another five minutes of silence and return for another round of Reflections/Listening.

### **PART THREE: CLOSING PRAYER**

The leader should be aware of the time and note when five minutes are remaining. At this point,

it is time to conclude. Everyone may not have had the opportunity to speak, but remind the group that there will be other times to continue this discussion. It is also worth reminding the group that there is never enough time to get extremely in-depth during the faith-sharing groups, and that is not really their purpose.

To end, the leader can propose taking a few moments of silence, followed by an invitation to voice prayers or petitions, before closing with the Our Father or another prayer. Ask the group if they approve of this conclusion. If not, solicit suggestions and try to accommodate the group. It may be best if a different group member volunteers to lead the closing prayer each time the group meets. If you can find a simple ritual that everyone agrees on, the group will join in more readily.

### **GUIDELINES AND HELPFUL HINTS:**

#### **1) Share any difficulties**

Leaders ought to discuss group difficulties with an adult faith formation director and/or other leaders. The director and other leaders will be able to give guidance, or on the rare occasion that it becomes necessary, speak to someone in the group who may be having difficulty.

#### **2) Create an atmosphere of trust**

It is vital to create an atmosphere of trust within the group so participants feel free to discuss their lives in the context of their faith. Leaders should remember their responsibility to support this environment. Because faith is the reason we share, trust that God will be present with grace to see them and the group through. Leaders do not need to make this explicit. It is enough to keep it in their minds and hearts.

#### **3) Pray for courage and wisdom to focus on real issues**

It is difficult for people to discuss personal thoughts and reactions on the level of faith. It is easy to become distracted by peripheral issues. Leaders serve the group best by guiding the discussion to a deeper level of personal lived experiences, faith, and belief. This is why honesty on the part of leaders is essential. They need to help the individuals in the group to move into this territory by setting an example. This kind of leadership takes faith, conviction, and courage. Leaders should ask God to help them provide a context for people to experience His love and fidelity in the time spent together. The Lord always honors such requests.

#### **4) Be realistic about how much can be accomplished**

Leaders should remember that the times together for small group sharing will necessarily only “scratch the surface.” It is impossible to fully explore a conversation in these groups. Leaders must realize that this group experience is only a beginning. Issues cannot be completely wrapped

up and packaged in less than an hour (this is normal!). If participants desire this level of conversation, they will need to make some choices in how they live their “regular” lives.

#### 5) **Don't be afraid to lead**

By virtue of familiarity with the materials, leaders have authority in the eyes of their group, even though some participants may be older than the leaders. People will look to leaders for some guidance. Leaders may be tempted to blend in with the group as peers among peers, but they also have to guide the conversation. Leaders need not be afraid of this leadership role! Others will expect it.

#### 6) **Honesty is more important than knowing it all**

Leaders may become anxious when they think they need to be perfect or instant experts on all topics. Instead, they will do better to know why a topic is part of the prayer journey and review their own reactions to the topic with their group. Leaders need to share some of their head as well as their heart. They should lead with honesty and openness.

#### 7) **Invite, never force**

Leaders facilitate to ensure that everyone who so desires has a chance to speak. Leaders will discover that some people are not speaking. This may be because they are shy and need encouragement, or because they do not have anything to say at the moment and are content to listen to others. Never force people to speak. Invite and be content with what individuals choose to share or not share.

#### 8) **Be patient with yourself and others**

Leaders should realize that leading a group can be a challenge, and therefore should not demand too much of themselves. The sensitivity and finesse needed is gained by practice. This can be an important learning experience.

### **TROUBLESHOOTING**

The following are some anxieties and problems that may arise in faith-sharing groups, along with some helpful suggestions on how to address them:

#### **a. The Leader need not have all the answers:**

Remember, the leader is merely a facilitator for discussion, not a spiritual expert. Most questions that arise in small groups are lifelong questions and cannot be solved by a simple response from the leader. The most important part of the small group is providing the room for people to reflect on significant life and faith issues, rather than having all the answers to those questions.

### **b. A member of the group is talking too much:**

It is important for the leader to facilitate discussion for all. In this case, simply ask the person to remember the 4-5 minute rule so that everyone has time to talk.

### **c. Some dramatic news is dropped by a group member:**

There is nothing wrong with serious and sometimes dramatic news being shared in a confidential small group setting. Sometimes when this happens however, a single person's issues can become the entire focus of one or more small group sessions, thus preventing others from sharing their own concerns.

Keep focused on the fact that not all of life's complications can be solved in a single gathering. Hold sacred the important experience that has been shared but work to make room for others to have their time as well. Let individuals know that sometimes it is beneficial to seek counseling for issues that may be difficult to fully share in a group setting. It is possible that a buried wound can surface with an emotional, spiritual, and psychological intensity that is best handled by a more experienced person and in a more personal one-on-one setting.

### **d. Someone appears completely uninvolved in the group:**

Leaders need to understand that many different personalities are present in a small group. Just because someone is choosing not to speak or seems aloof, does not mean that he/she is not getting something out of the group (in fact they may be inwardly very engaged!). Alternately, if someone's aloofness is aggressive or in some way disruptive to the others, the leader can privately ask the individual if he or she is having some difficulty. This will usually surface any real problems and provide a solution for the rest of the meetings. If not, in confidence politely point out any behaviors which may be causing problems for others, and ask the person if they would be mindful of this for the sake of the others in the group.

## **LONG-TERM GROUPS**

### **KNOWING WHEN TO STAY OR LEAVE**

For groups like Sacred Story Community, there will come a time when individuals will need to make a discernment on whether they want to stay with the community. This discernment to "make a change" should only come in a time of sustained consolation. As we note in **Forty Weeks**, choices made in a time of desolation (decrease of faith, hope and love) are easily influenced by the enemy of human nature. Here are some indicators that will help individuals discern the choice for a long-term commitment to an SSC. Always discuss your discernment with your facilitator or other trusted spiritual director. If you consult for your discernment outside the group, it is beneficial to always keep the facilitator up to date on your process.



## Consolation

- that you are drawing reasonable consolation from your group participation and are discovering that you enjoy being with the others, even when not everything or everyone is to your liking, and find yourself praying for other members on a regular basis.
- that you are growing in your faith, even in the midst of the difficulties of life, and feel that you would not want to lose these people as friends in the Lord.
- that you feel “at home” when you are with the members of your community, either virtually or in person and that you are grateful for the people you are meeting and living your faith with.

## Desolation

- that you feel the group is not benefitting your overall own growth in faith and that you have not drawn any consolation from the experience.
- that you find that you are unable to keep to the structure of the regular meetings and feel a need to veer off course and do something different than what is proposed like advice giving to other members of your group.
- that you find yourself more often than not, feeling unsettled or even angry by your interactions with other members of your group or the facilitator.

