

Tips for Facilitators

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UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Fall 2007

No matter what your church calls small group meetings, -- be it Chalice Groups, Covenant Groups or Connecting Circles -- there is a special magic to an effective meeting. It may be experienced as a feeling of integrity, a glint in the eye, an aha, a new respect for a fellow member, a reflective quietness, or just a plain "that makes sense to me." It brings a joy that makes you feel good that you came to the meeting that day. It is not magic -- not that I want to take away from the holy spirit (please notice no caps.) The working of a facilitator who knows his/her craft can enhance the effectiveness of a meeting. As more and more small groups are sharing the leadership of our meetings, I would like to offer a few tips to the "new emerging facilitators."

In our church in Charleston, SC we offered a facilitators' training at the beginning of the church year in October and we'll offer it again in January. It includes a potluck supper with all members attending, a fun get-acquainted game, a review of our guidelines, a time for revising the guidelines, some role-playing, and a question and answer time. Here are some tips we include in our facilitator training.

Tip #1 Review the ground rules for your groups. The ground rules are to add to the integrity of the meeting and not to stand in the way of the flow of the meeting. They may include items such as: respecting confidentiality, having only one person speak at a time, no advice giving, staying on the topic, and beginning and ending on time. They are key for an effective meeting. The facilitator can help keep members on the "path" by saying, "I think it's time to remember one of our ground rules...(stating the rule kindly). Does that help us get back on track?"

Tip #2 Members sharing their stories of grappling with a concept, feeling or experience, are important. The most significant factor for success among our folks is providing a place where they can explore and express their thoughts, feelings, concepts and life stories in a secure environment of listeners. The depth of

sharing develops as the group grows in security, trust, caring and friendship. If these stories sometimes get off-topic or long, the facilitator may need to decide whether to intercede. An important part of facilitating is to be sensitive and to be able to decide when a story is no longer appropriate. The facilitator can start by saying, "Sorry to interrupt you, John, we probably need you to finish this story."

Tip #3 You are in charge but you are not in charge. Your job is to empower others. Strive to encourage discussion and sharing among group members. Start the meeting with a welcome. Be at ease and open. Be mindful that for that session, you are the responsible person in leading the group "as you would wish to be led." Watch the timing for check-in (usually two minutes per person), and have some thoughts to share yourself when the occasion presents itself. Your job is to encourage others to speak. Leave enough time for a closing. You need not end the meeting with a great summation. The chosen closing words will do. The purpose of the meeting is to encourage each of us in our own spiritual journey.