

CTBI Lent Course 2016: Pilgrimage

Should you be asked or volunteer to facilitate a conversation group, your involvement will comprise three distinct phases – **preparation, accompaniment and evaluation.**

ONE: PREPARATION

Prayer

To facilitate a significant conversation about the spiritual dimension to life is to make an act of faith - for no matter how skilled or prepared you believe yourself to be, a positive experience can never be assured. There are too many personal variables when a group of people who you may not know well start to open up to one another in your company. When faced with such a prospect, therefore, it is worth paying attention to the transcendent dimension to the encounter and prepare yourself appropriately. At such times we recognise once again our dependence on God and thus the starting point is in prayer.

For those who find this activity difficult perhaps it may be easier to think of this kind of preparation in another way. Most of us recognise the need to centre ourselves in the face of challenging circumstances. Before opening our doors and our hearts to others we should, therefore, seek harmony and balance within. Good facilitators will seek their own inner peace so as to be fully available to those they are about to accompany.

Preparation of the space

If you have a choice about where to hold your group, or are doing so in your own home or church, you can plan as suggested below, although we recognise that you may be facilitating a group hosted by someone else and have less freedom to re-arrange their furniture or create a prayer focus. In that case we recommend that you meet and work together with them in preparation for the start of the course.

The atmosphere in a group is influenced by the physical surroundings in which the conversation takes place. Too cluttered a setting, for example, can be very distracting to people who are trying to explore their inner thoughts and feelings. The size and shape of the room, its colour, warmth and odour can all make a difference to the way people behave.

Even things as simple as the placement of the furniture or the way a room is lit all have their effect. Arranging the chairs in a circle so that everyone can see each other is always helpful – but even here you have to be careful. They should be placed far enough apart so that group members will not feel on top of each other, but close enough to encourage intimacy. The seats themselves should not be so comfortable that they invite people to fall asleep but not so uncomfortable that they cause a distraction.

A symbolic way of reminding participants that at the heart of their enquiry is the spiritual dimension to life is to prepare a central focus. Designed to reflect the theme under consideration, this marks out a sacred space for meeting. Such a focus can be very simple or more complicated but it should not be too busy as this could distract and scatter attention rather than adding to it.

For some people this can be a wonderful opportunity for lateral thinking and creativity. But, for those who find it difficult to be express themselves in this way, even a simple bowl of flowers, together with an icon or discreet cross placed on a coloured cloth, can make a tremendous difference to the overall atmosphere of the room.

TWO: ACCOMPANIMENT

Welcome and prayer (15 mins)

Welcome

The way in which people are welcomed to a small group is highly significant. Everyone needs to be assured that their presence is valued and this is especially so when they are meeting for the first time. We all have our own way of expressing warmth and interest but people quickly notice, for example, whether or not you remember their names.

'How Are You'?

After everyone has gathered it is often helpful to invite people to introduce themselves and say, in a sentence or two, how they are feeling. The point is made at the very beginning that the life experience of each person is of interest to the group and care is expressed for their well-being. Incidentally, the way in which the facilitator listens to these responses can set the tone for the whole meeting.

Shared Silence and Opening Prayer

At this point a candle may be lit to signify a change of attention. The group is invited to become open to the silent, loving presence of God in their midst. Should it be thought helpful some suitable reflective music may now be played, after which the opening prayer or reflection can be read aloud from the appropriate booklet.

Stimulus and Reflection (25 mins)

Introduction to the Theme

On the front of each of the booklets is a short summary of the theme being explored. It may be helpful to read this introduction aloud, but for the purpose of added clarity, facilitators may wish to make or add their own short summary.

Stimulus Material

It should be stressed to the group that everything that has been prepared for them, the words and images, the music or the central focus, may act as a stimulus to conversation. They do not need to be confined to just the 'conversation pieces'.

Indeed, as participants will already have received the booklets in advance, the hope is that they will already have taken time to reflect upon them, so they, too, are prepared for the conversation. They may also have looked at the other additional material available on the website, or listened to a BBC Radio 4 programme on some aspect of 'Pilgrimage' – all of these things add to the richness of the stimulus provided.

As far as engaging with the stimulus material is concerned, participants should be encouraged to connect with it imaginatively rather than literally. A number of different ways of engaging with it could be suggested but they should be more about 'sitting with' the material, sifting through it, and seeing what it does to them rather than trying to 'work it out'. Even when the stimulus is a piece of sacred text, the same invitation should be given.

Time Alone For Individual Reflection

Conversation groups tend to be more productive if group members spend some time alone in silent reflection – even if participants have prepared themselves appropriately in advance. While some people like to spend these silent moments in company, others prefer to be on their own. Having somewhere else for people to retire to is not essential to the methodology, but it is a real help to those who need relative isolation in order to think.

It may be strange to suggest some time alone as part of a group activity, however, a period of silence (of perhaps 15 or 20 minutes) has two great benefits. Firstly, it gives time and space for God to speak in and through the reflective processes of each person. Secondly, it allows those who do not find it easy to express themselves in small groups time to collect their thoughts and formulate a response.

To aid the reflective process, some of the following questions could be articulated for the group before they begin:

- 'What do these readings or images evoke in you as you spend time with them?'
- 'What do they call to mind, or help you to remember from your own experience?'
- 'What questions, insights, or observations occur to you that you consider worthy of sharing with others?'

Sharing and Conversation (45-60 mins)

The Sharing of Experience

On returning to each other's company each person is invited to offer the fruit of their reflections. Everyone should be given the opportunity to share some of their thoughts, but there is no pressure to do so. Keeping in mind that the emphasis is on the sharing of experience, this will often take the form of a personal story in which some incident from their life will be illustrative of what they want to say. It may, however, be something else - perhaps the words of a song or just a personal observation or just some nugget of wisdom or insight they have picked up on the way.

Conversation

After each person has had the opportunity of 'presenting', a more free flowing conversation may ensue when some of what has been shared is developed. Here the facilitator is at his or her most useful, paying attention to the group as a whole as well as to the individual concerned, intervening as appropriate to ensure clarity and kindness.

In all good conversations there is no outcome decided in advance, and so the facilitator should not be concerned if what emerges is somewhat oblique to intended theme. As far as his or her own contribution is concerned, the facilitator should simply add their own insights as required - always keeping in mind that their contribution is no more significant than that of anyone else.

Review and Prayer (10 mins)

Looking back

After an agreed length of time, there is silence once more as each individual is invited to quietly make an internal review of what has taken place. The hope is that each participant will have found something to take away for further consideration - something which the facilitator should invite them to consider. It is commonly reported that what emerges in the conversation group often sheds light on the time between sessions, making the series of meetings a coherent, collective faith journey.

Another aspect to this time of review is the opportunity it presents to care for one another in a deeper way. During each session there will inevitably have been a certain amount of self-disclosure and the invitation is given to each person to remember everyone else between meetings. In this way one of the most valuable opportunities presented through this kind of encounter is made real in the widening of each person's circle of concern. We will all have discovered new things about one another - something which we can take into our prayerful moments. The risks that have been taken deserve this kind of loving response. Experience suggests that if this dimension to the group experience is embraced wholeheartedly by participants it bears abundant fruit in the building of community.

Shared Silence and Closing Prayer

The meeting ends, as it has begun, with a prayerful silence. Again, if appropriate, a short piece of music can be played before the reading of the closing prayer or reflection from the booklet. This brings the gathering to an end and thanks are expressed for all that has taken place.

Before Leaving

After such a group experience, which may last up to two hours, we have found it important that there is the equivalent of a 'warm down' after physical exercise – a time of relaxation accompanied by chat and light refreshments. This both allows participants time to 'return to normal' before leaving and gives the opportunity for people who do not normally meet a chance to get to know each other in the normal fashion.

THREE: EVALUATION

The process of evaluation is a vital tool for learning and developing as a facilitator. Throughout the lifetime of the group, a good practitioner will be reflecting on all that occurs and at the end of the agreed number of sessions will be asking the group to evaluate for themselves what they have experienced.

The facilitator's own on-going evaluation tends to take two forms for at the end of each session it is important to examine both what happened in the meeting itself and your own involvement.

With regard to an individual session try and look back over the meeting and see if you can identify moments of ease and moments of difficulty. Consider what you have discovered about the group as a whole and the different participants, their history, needs, engagement or expectations. How will this information help you in planning for or delivering the next meeting?

When evaluating your own performance recall how you felt at different stages in the meeting. Can you remember moments when you felt either comfortable or the reverse? What do you think caused these differences? What are you discovering about yourself and your abilities as a facilitator?

Evaluating the process

It is often helpful to a facilitator to take a few notes after each session just to remind you later on of the whole journey of the group. You may wish to note observable attitudinal changes, significant learning, any difficulties and their resolution. These observations are worth pulling together as your own feedback to the group at the end of the final meeting.

On the last occasion evaluation by the group as a whole of the Lenten Course is invited. You may just want a few minutes chatting informally together about it as you share a celebratory cup of something, or you could approach this in a slightly more formal way by raising particular questions - examples of which may be downloaded from the website.

From the point of view of CTBI and Shoreline Conversations, it would also be helpful if the facilitator could feedback through the website how the group found this whole exercise. Was this a helpful way for people to explore themes of life and faith common to all the churches?

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