

How to Effectively Facilitate House Church Discussion

Small group facilitation is an art form. Some people are naturally gifted at it, some people don't want anything to do with it, but everyone can be taught to do it well.

Here you will learn some of the best time-tested and proven tips and tools for leading small group discussions.

Remember the purpose of the meeting—Keep in mind that this is not a “church service” in the traditional sense, so your goal is not to provide a stage production or a one-sided monologue. People are gathering for deep Christian fellowship and biblical discussion. Anything outside of that can be done another time in another setting.

Don't worry about needing to know everything—You don't need to have all the answers, and you don't need to fix every problem. Simply provide strategies for researching and finding answers. That way, people don't become dependant on you—they learn to be dependant on God, the Bible, and each other. Always point them to Jesus, and never be afraid to say, “I don't know.”

Remember you're not teaching a class—The temptation for many of us—especially those who are really into the Word of God—is to dominate the discussion. The fact is, the more you allow others the opportunity to talk, the more they'll become involved and open up... and the more they'll learn, too. Your level of interaction will be more than others in the group simply because of your role, so you'll need to be proactive about keeping others engaged in the discussion.

Be secure in your identity—The more you make your goal “being liked,” the worse you'll do. Be an ambassador of Christ. Don't be afraid to speak the truth or challenge things that others bring up. Scripture will defend itself. Encourage others to do even greater things than you ever have. Make your goal the ministry of reconciliation (bringing unity between God and a group of people) so that all can excel in the things of God.

Don't let legalism take over—Don't feel guilty if things went differently and you didn't get to do something you planned. The question is not whether or not the system was perfect or whether every planned element of the meeting took place. Rather it is this: Was God able to express His presence at our meeting? Make every effort to avoid man-made tangents, but keep your eyes open for Spirit-led detours.

Model Preparation—Read your Bible regularly. Pray often. Study Christian books and listen to a wide range of sermons. Journal. The more you engage yourself in learning and growing your own life, the more people in your group will be challenged to do the same. Be a pacesetter. Try to come every week with your own testimony of something God did through you, and always be prepared to share a revelation from Scripture, even if it's short.

Don't let Jesus get trampled!—Some people are natural talkers and tend to dominate the discussion with trivial things. Conversations about good movies and the hamburger someone ate last night might be interesting, but they do not bring people closer to God, and they don't accomplish the purpose for the meeting (which is why everyone set aside time from their week to come). If discussion starts drifting away

from the planned topic, treat the situation according to the nature of Christ and draw attention back to the reason everyone came. Sometimes in our efforts to honor and cater to natural talkers, we end up dishonoring everyone else in the group who sacrificed time to come for an expected purpose. Natural talkers need to be taught consideration for others so that Jesus can accomplish everything He desires in the meeting. It may feel rude to shut down a side conversation, but what's more rude is wasting the time of those who came for the right purpose. Always divert side-discussions to after the meeting.

Let people process their thoughts and feelings—Again, this isn't a class; it's a discussion and a fellowship. Some topics that may come up are emotionally stirring or bring up old wounds. Let people vent about those situations because part of them becoming effective Christians is processing such thoughts and feelings. If they're bringing something like this up, it's because they trust you and the group members to help them process. Don't feel like you need to provide answers; simply provide a listening ear. Validate their feelings as real and understandable, offer to pray with the person after the meeting or right then (whichever is most appropriate), and assure them that we're all in this together so you and the group are here for them.

Honor the authority of Scripture—Many of us believe a lot of things that are not found in the Bible. The apostle Paul said that all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." If a dispute arises or tensions stir about an issue, turn the group's attention to Scripture—"Does anyone know what the Bible says about this?" If the Bible is silent on the matter, then invite the group to form their own individual conclusions and move on; but point out that since the Bible doesn't offer an answer, none of us should embrace our conclusions with the same certainty with which we embrace Scripture. And that means we don't need to argue.

Be grateful for every answer—This will significantly increase the interaction that takes place in your group. Listen intently to everyone, maintain eye contact with the speaker, and throw in little encouragements whenever appropriate.

Keep the discussion moving—Feel free to ask questions about things that people say—even if you know what they mean. Keep the group dynamics going and maintain the focus on what the Holy Spirit has been doing and saying at your meeting.

Hide behind the group when fitting—This may seem like a strange one, but sometimes the group is your most valuable asset as a leader. As the lead-personality in a group, people will often look to you for approval before they look to what others think. If someone says something that's absolutely wrong, and you want to refrain from shooting them down publicly, turn it over to group discussion by asking, "What do you all think?" One of two things will happen: Either the issue will correct itself in the context of discussion, or everyone will agree with the wrong perspective, allowing you to bring Biblical correction without making one individual feel singled-out as wrong.

Consider the makeup of your group—Some people may be quiet and reserved while others may be rather expressive. Don't be afraid to ask the talkative person to hold their answer as you direct the question specifically to the quieter people: "What do you think?" or, "I'm interested to hear what ____ has to say about this..." If

people are noticeably intimidated by group interaction, it's okay to back off so they don't feel uncomfortable attending. Some people aren't interested in speaking at all, but that doesn't mean they aren't learning and growing. In time, they'll open up, so feel free to give these people space for as long as they need. You may consider asking them after a meeting why they don't say anything. Sometimes it's just that they can't get a word in edgewise, and that will alert you to a need for better moderation of the discussion.

Use silence to your advantage—Give others (and maybe yourself) time to think and muster the courage to respond to questions. You don't need to fill every awkward pause. Let the silence continue for a full minute if needed—people will catch on! It's not always your responsibility to make noise—often times, silence occurs because God is moving on someone's heart. This will also encourage a culture in which the group expects that you're not going to let them off the hook until someone answers, which will lead to faster responses in the future.

Involve God in the discussion—At various points, as the group interacts, something will be said or done that requires a response to God. For instance, talking about forgiveness is nice—especially if everyone shares an insight—but you would be missing the boat if you didn't ask something like, "Would it be alright with all of you if we took a moment and asked the Holy Spirit if we have anyone we need to forgive?" Then lead out in prayer or ask someone else to. Allow God to participate in the conversation by bringing topics to a time of speaking with Him as a group. Much of this will happen during the application time at each meeting, but remain sensitive to the possibility of short prayers in the middle of the discussion time.

Pray daily for the people in your group—Make a point to dedicate yourself to Christ's work in your fellow Christians. Ask God for insights that will help or challenge specific individuals in your group. Ask Him to give you words of encouragement and affirmation for various people. And if correction of some kind is necessary, ask Him for the right words, actions (or lack of actions), and attitude to convey the transformative love of Jesus in an effective and meaningful way.