

Starting a Group

FOR PARTICIPANTS AND FACILITATORS

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Some Practical Considerations

- This process is designed to take one hour. It can be offered before work, at lunch, or anytime. (Pro tip: make sure the time works well for the facilitator.)
- There is no prep for the facilitator. The participants bring the content every week.
- This group can be held in person or on Zoom.
- Ideally, the group will have 12-20 active participants. No one will come every week. A weekly attendance of 6-12 will yield healthy conversation. Start small and grow. You don't have to start with 15 people!
- This is not group therapy, it is a spiritual practice. Confusing it with group therapy or allowing it to be used that way can damage the group.
- This group process can also be used with decision-making bodies of the church to reflect theologically on issues in the parish.

Purpose: A Group Process of Reflection and Discernment

This biblically grounded reflection group model, created by St. Benedict's Workshop, helps Christians "clothe themselves with Christ" in every aspect of their daily lives. This practice is our core spiritual discipline for Christian formation. It provides disciples with an easily accessible small group process for discerning faithfulness in daily life through a particular pattern of theological reasoning and reflection. Biblical stories and teachings are the primary resources participants use to interpret, analyze, discuss, and respond to the diverse situations and circumstances they encounter in their daily lives.

Purpose of Theological Reflection

There are several key goals of a reflection group: (1) teaching disciples – clergy and laity - how to reason theologically in connection with events, practices, and decision-making; (2) providing ongoing opportunities for disciples to become proficient in their knowledge of scripture and agile in their use of scripture to interpret and shape their responses to events in daily life; (3) providing ongoing opportunities for disciples to exercise and hone their analogical imagination by making connections between scripture and events in daily life; and (4) providing ongoing opportunities for individual disciples and communities of disciples to be transformed over time into the image of Christ through reasoned reflection on Christian practice.

Finding the “Rhyme” Between Scripture and Contemporary Experience

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.” Often attributed to Mark Twain, this quote insightfully describes a foundational aspect of the Workshop reflection group practice.

For modern disciples to conform their lives to the patterns of Christ, whether individually or collectively as the body of Christ, they must use their imagination to recognize the myriad patterns and actions portrayed in the life of Jesus and apply them to their own lives. This movement from the life of Jesus narrated in the biblical texts to modern daily life occurs by imaginative, creative extensions of the biblical stories into the lives of modern disciples. Living the life of Christ in today’s world is *more complex* and *more concrete* than trying to follow a moral code or a set of rules. Instead, disciples let the life of Jesus function as the moral paradigm that offers normative guidance for a way of life. By using the biblical stories about Jesus *analogically*, disciples discover patterns in the stories and then imaginatively apply those patterns to their own circumstances and actions.

The work of analogical imagination is to catch the rhyme between a story of Jesus in scripture and some aspect of the modern disciple’s presentation of an event or situation. In this practice of using and applying analogical imagination to catch the rhyme, it’s never about being “right” or “wrong” in the specific application of a scripture to a contemporary event. It’s more about doing the hard work of simply trying to match a current situation and story with the most appropriate stories in the biblical narrative. And the more times a disciple does this work in a community of faithful friends, the more adept the disciple becomes at catching the rhyme between the biblical stories and what is happening in the disciple’s own life of faith.

Moreover, because of contextual, sociological, and historical differences over the past two millennia, it’s important to remember that there will probably never be a complete rhyme between one passage of scripture and a presenter’s contemporary event. Nevertheless, disciples can often identify places where their contemporary experiences and actions do rhyme with aspects of stories from scripture. Discovering these rhymes provides fruitful opportunities for disciples to use their analogical imagination to shape faithful responses to circumstances in daily life.

A possible faithful response is...

There is not just one “right” action that God would have disciples take in any given situation. There are many possible faithful responses to a particular situation. The role of the reflection group is to present a variety of scripture passages that suggest different possibilities for faithful responses to the presenter’s event (without trying to fix the situation or tell the person the right thing to do). The scriptures passages may not agree with each other, and that is good! A variety of scriptures give the presenting disciple many possible responses to consider. The presenting disciple is encouraged to reflect on what is presented and avoid making a hasty decision about how to move

forward. The presenting disciple listens, absorbs, and discusses/processes the scriptures presented by the group. The task remains with the disciple to continue “hearing” and “trying on” the scriptures presented to determine which, if any, of the scriptures presented most clearly rhymes with the disciple’s situation.

Ground rules:

No psychologizing: no use of popular wisdom or any other source of reflection besides the biblical witness.

No fixing: the point of using multiple biblical stories and teachings is simply to shed light on the issue that has been brought up, not to tell the speaker what to do or how to solve their problem. The more stories the better, to avoid the sense that the Bible is a source of “answers” and that there is only one “right” answer when considering how to act faithfully in a particular context.

Absolute confidentiality: There is no discussion of what happens in the group outside for the group.

Method

1. Open with prayer
2. One person shares an event or issue that they face in their life, ministry, or church. The event should be current, specific, and should be a discernment question – discerning how to be Christ in the situation. Events can be large or small; mundane or life-changing.
3. Ask the group if there are clarifying questions. This is a time to come to understand what is happening, and if there are additional factors or layers to the situation. It is the facilitator’s job to make sure the group understands the situation and what the discernment question is. Sometimes the presenter needs help clarifying the precise issue. The facilitator should be alert that sometimes the issue presented is not the underlying issue, which can be unearthed through clarifying questions.
4. Go to scripture. Find a story or passage that “rhymes”, that shows a possible faithful response. Until people really understand the process, have them use this formula for presenting their scripture:
 - A. Read the actual scripture. (It is fine to google it or ask the group if anyone knows where it is instead of saying “I am thinking of the time Jesus healed the bleeding woman...”)
 - B. “I chose this scripture because...”
 - C. “The rhyme for me is...”
 - D. “The possible faithful response I hear in this scripture is...”

E. Discuss as a group. Do other people hear additional rhymes? Additional faithful responses? What are the reflections from the person who offered a life event? Give the person who shared the life event time to process the scripture and make connections before moving on to another scripture.

F. When the person who shared the event is ready, they can ask for an additional scripture.

G. Repeat the process

It is fine to share personal experiences of similar situations as long as they are not veiled pieces of advice.

5. End with prayer

Examples of life issues or events

1. Someone I supervise at my job is not doing her job well, and I don't know how to address the issue.
2. I am feeling burned out at my job, and I don't know if I should look for a new position.
3. I'm senior warden and I want to start a ministry for undocumented immigrants, but our major givers are more conservative than I am and think it's "political".
4. I want my son to be confirmed, but he says he's an atheist. Should I force the issue?
5. Our church welcomes the homeless in worship, but sometimes they can be disruptive and scare people. Some people want to have a separate service for them. I'm on the committee to figure this out, and I don't know what to do.
6. My father is dying and wants to go on hospice. I know there are more treatments he could pursue. I'm conflicted about how to respond.
7. I have been offered a promotion at work, but it would mean more travel away from my family. I'm not sure if I should take the job or stay in my current position.

A note to the facilitator: In order to prepare for leading a group, you may want to read either of the two books:

- Johnson, Abigail. *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).
- Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Each book describes the creation and maintenance of small groups devoted to giving people a place to reflect upon their daily life in the light of their faith. Neither one is exactly like the process outlined here, so be attentive to the differences. What these

books are especially good for is helping you think about how to set up a group in a way that will help it to maintain its health over the long haul.